Molly McDonald

a story of the Old Frontier

Randall Parrish

MOLLY McDONALD

His fingers gripped the iron top rail, and he slowly pulled his body up.

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A TALE OF THE OLD FRONTIER

BY

RANDALL PARRISH

AUTHOR OF "KEITH OF THE BORDER," "MY LADY OF DOUBT," "MY LADY OF THE SOUTH," ETC., ETC.

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS BY
ERNEST L. BLUMENSCHEIN

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Annex

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MOLLY McDONALD

CHAPTER I

AN UNPLEASANT SITUATION

WHEN, late in May, 1868, Major Daniel McDonald, Sixth Infantry, was first assigned to command the new three company post established southwest of Fort Dodge, designed to protect the newly discovered Cimarron trail leading to Santa Fé across the desert, and, purely by courtesy, officially termed Fort Devere, he naturally considered it perfectly safe to invite his only daughter to join him there for her summer vacation. Indeed, at that time, there was apparently no valid reason why he should deny himself this pleasure. Except for certain vague rumors regarding uneasiness among the Sioux warriors north of the Platte, the various tribes of the Plains were causing no unusual trouble to military authorities, although, of course, there was no time in the history of that country utterly devoid of peril from young raiders,

usually aided and abetted by outcast whites. However, the Santa Fé route, by this date, had become a well-travelled trail, protected by scattered posts along its entire route, frequently patrolled by troops, and merely considered dangerous for small parties, south of the Cimarron, where roving Comanches in bad humor might be encountered.

Fully assured as to this by officers met at Fort Ripley, McDonald, who had never before served west of the Mississippi, wrote his daughter a long letter, describing in careful detail the route, set an exact date for her departure, and then, satisfied all was well arranged, set forth with his small command on the long march overland. He had not seen his daughter for over two years, as during her vacation time (she was attending Sunnycrest School, on the Hudson), she made her home with an aunt in Connecticut. This year the aunt was in Europe, not expecting to return until fall, and the father had hopefully counted on having the girl with him once again in Kentucky. Then came his sudden, unexpected transfer west, and the final decision to have her join him there. Why not? If she remained the same high-spirited army girl, she would thoroughly enjoy the unusual experience of a few months of real frontier life, and the only

hardship involved would be the long stage ride from Ripley. This, however, was altogether prairie travel, monotonous enough surely, but without special danger, and he could doubtless arrange to meet her himself at Kansas City, or send one of his officers for that purpose.

This was the situation in May, but by the middle of June conditions had greatly changed throughout all the broad Plains country. The spirit of savage war had spread rapidly from the Platte to the Rio Pecos, and scarcely a wild tribe remained disaffected. Arapahoe, Cheyenne, Pawnee, Comanche, and Apache alike espoused the cause of the Sioux, and their young warriors, breaking away from the control of older chiefs, became ugly and warlike. Devere, isolated as it was from the main route of travel (the Santa Fé stages still following the more northern trail), heard merely rumors of the prevailing condition through tarrying hunters, and possibly an occasional army courier, yet soon realized the gravity of the situation because of the almost total cessation of travel by way of the Cimarron and the growing insolence of the surrounding Comanches. Details from the small garrison were, under urgent orders from headquarters at Fort Wallace, kept constantly scouting as far south as the fork of the Red

River, and then west to the mountains. Squads from the single cavalry company guarded the few caravans venturing still to cross the Cimarron Desert, or bore despatches to Fort Dodge. Thus the few soldiers remaining on duty at the home station became slowly aware that this outburst of savagery was no longer a mere tribal affair. Outrages were reported from the Solomon, the Republican, the Arkansas valleys. A settlement was raided on Smoky Fork; stages were attacked near the Caches, and one burned; a wagon train was ambushed in the Raton Pass, and only escaped after desperate fighting. Altogether the situation appeared extremely serious and the summer promised war in earnest.

McDonald was rather slow to appreciate the real facts. His knowledge of Indian tactics was exceedingly small, and the utter isolation of his post kept him ignorant. At first he was convinced that it was merely a local disturbance and would end as suddenly as begun. Then, when realization finally came, it was already too late to stop the girl. She would be already on her long journey. What could he do? What immediate steps could he hope to take for her protection? Ordinarily he would not have hesitated, but now a decision was not so easily made. Of his command scarcely

thirty men remained at Devere, a mere infantry guard, together with a small squad of cavalrymen, retained for courier service. His only remaining commissioned officer at the post was the partially disabled cavalry captain, acting temporarily as adjutant, because incapacitated for taking the field. He had waited until the last possible moment, trusting that a shift in conditions might bring back some available officer. Now he had to choose between his duty as commander and as father. Further delay was impossible.

Devere was a fort merely by courtesy. In reality it consisted only of a small stockade hastily built of cottonwood timber, surrounding in partial protection a half dozen shacks, and one fairly decent log house. The situation was upon a slight elevation overlooking the ford, some low bluffs, bare of timber but green with June grass to the northward, while in every other direction extended an interminable sand-desert, ever shifting beneath wind blasts, presenting as desolate a scene as eye could witness. The yellow flood of the river, still swollen by melting mountain snow, was a hundred feet from the stockade gate, and on its bank stood the log cavalry stables. Below, a scant half mile away, were the only trees visible, a scraggly grove of cottonwoods, while down the face of the bluff and across the flat ran

the slender ribbon of trail. Monotonous, unchanging, it was a desolate picture to watch day after day in the hot summer.

In the gloom following an early supper the two officers sat together in the single room of the cabin, a candle sputtering on the table behind them, smoking silently or moodily discussing the situation. McDonald was florid and heavily built, his gray mustache hanging heavily over a firm mouth, while the Captain was of another type, tall, with dark eyes and hair. The latter by chance opened the important topic.

"By the way, Major," he said carelessly, "I guess it is just as well you stopped your daughter from coming out to this hole. Lord, but it would be an awful place for a woman."

"But I did n't," returned the other moodily. "I put it off too long."

"Put it off! Good heavens, man, did n't you write when you spoke about doing so? Do you actually mean the girl is coming — here?"

McDonald groaned.

"That is exactly what I mean, Travers. Damme, I have n't thought of anything else for a week. Oh, I know now I was an old fool even to conceive of such a trip, but when I first wrote her I had no conception

of what it was going to be like out here. There was not a rumor of Indian trouble a month ago, and when the tribes did break out it was too late for me to get word back East. The fact is, I am in the devil of a fix — without even an officer whom I can send to meet her, or turn her back. If I should go myself it would mean a court-martial."

Travers stared into the darkness through the open door, sucking at his pipe.

"By George, you are in a pickle," he acknowledged slowly. "I supposed she had been headed off long ago. Have n't heard you mention the matter since we first got here. Where do you suppose the lass is by now?"

"Near as I can tell she would leave Ripley the 18th."

"Humph! Then starting to-night, a good rider might intercept her at Fort Dodge. She would be in no danger travelling alone for that distance. The regular stages are running yet, I suppose?"

"Yes; so far as I know."

"Under guard?"

"Only from the Caches to Fort Union; there has been no trouble along the lower Arkansas yet. The troops from Dodge are scouting the country north, and

we are supposed to keep things clear of hostiles down this way."

"Supposed to — yes; but we can't patrol five hundred miles of desert with a hundred men, most of them dough-boys. The devils can break through any time they get ready — you know that. At this minute there is n't a mile of safe country between Dodge and Union. If she was my daughter —"

"You 'd do what?" broke in McDonald, jumping to his feet. "I 'd give my life to know what to do!"

"Why, I 'd send somebody to meet her — to turn her back if that was possible. Peyton would look after her there at Ripley until you could arrange."

"That 's easy enough to say, Travers, but tell me who is there to send? Do you chance to know an enlisted man out yonder who would do — whom you would trust to take care of a young girl alone?"

The Captain bent his head on one hand, silent for some minutes.

"They are a tough lot, Major; that 's a fact, when you stop to call the roll. Those recruits we got at Leavenworth were mostly rough-necks — seven of them in the guard-house to-night. Our best men are all out," with a wave of his hand to the south. "It 's only the riff-raff we 've got left, at Devere."

"You can't go?"

The Captain rubbed his lame leg regretfully.

"No; I 'd risk it if I could only ride, but I could n't sit a saddle."

"And my duty is here; it would cost me my commission."

There was a long thoughtful silence, both men moodily staring out through the door. Away in the darkness unseen sentinels called the hour. Then Travers dropped one hand on the other's knee.

"Dan," he said swiftly, "how about that fellow who came in with despatches from Union just before dark? He looked like a real man."

"I did n't see him. I was down river with the wood-cutters all day."

Travers got up and paced the floor.

"I remember now. What do you say? Let 's have him in, anyhow. They never would have trusted him for that ride if he had n't been the right sort." He strode over to the door, without waiting an answer. "Here, Carter," he called, "do you know where that cavalryman is who rode in from Fort Union this afternoon?"

A face appeared in the glow of light, and a gloved hand rose to salute.

"He 's asleep in 'B's' shack, sir," the orderly replied. "Said he 'd been on the trail two nights and a day."

"Reckon he had, and some riding at that. Rout him out, will you; tell him the Major wants to see him here at once."

The man wheeled as if on a pivot, and disappeared.

"If Carter could only ride," began McDonald, but Travers interrupted impatiently.

"If! But we all know he can't. Worst I ever saw, must have originally been a sailor." He slowly refilled his pipe. "Now, see here, Dan, it 's your daughter that 's to be looked after, and therefore I want you to size this man up for yourself. I don't pretend to know anything about him, only he looks like a soldier, and they must think well of him at Union."

McDonald nodded, but without enthusiasm; then dropped his head into his hands. In the silence a coyote howled mournfully not far away; then a shadow appeared on the log step, the light of the candle flashing on a row of buttons.

"This is the man, sir," said the orderly, and stood aside to permit the other to enter.

CHAPTER II

"BRICK" HAMLIN

THE two officers looked up with some eagerness, McDonald straightening in his chair, and returning the cavalryman's salute instinctively, his eyes expressing surprise. He was a straight-limbed fellow, slenderly built, and appearing taller than he really was by reason of his erect, soldierly carriage; thin of waist, broad of chest, dressed in rough service uniform, without jacket, just as he had rolled out of the saddle, rough shirt open at the throat, patched, discolored trousers, with broad yellow stripe down the seam, stuck into service riding boots, a revolver dangling at his left hip, and a soft hat, faded sadly, crushed in one hand.

The Major saw all this, yet it was at the man's uncovered face he gazed most intently. He looked upon a countenance browned by sun and alkali, intelligent, sober, heavily browed, with eyes of dark gray rather deeply set; firm lips, a chin somewhat prominent, and a broad forehead, the light colored hair above closely

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trimmed; the cheeks were darkened by two days' growth of beard. McDonald unclosed, then clenched his hand.

"You are from Fort Union, Captain Travers tells me?"

"Yes, sir," the reply slow, deliberate, as though the speaker had no desire to waste words. "I brought despatches; they were delivered to Captain Travers."

"Yes, I know; but I may require you for other service. What were your orders?"

"To return at convenience."

"Good. I know Hawley, and do not think he would object. What is your regiment?"

"Seventh Cavalry."

"Oh, yes, just organized; before that?"

"The Third."

"I see you are a non-com — corporal?"

"Sergeant, sir, since my transfer."

"Second enlistment?"

"No, first in the regulars — the Seventh was picked from other commands."

"I understand. You say first in the regulars. Does that mean you saw volunteer service?"

"Three years, sir."

"Ah!" his eyes brightening instantly. "Then how

does it happen you failed to try for a commission after the war? You appear to be intelligent, educated?"

The Sergeant smiled.

"Unfortunately my previous service had been performed in the wrong uniform, sir," he said quietly. "I was in a Texas regiment."

There was a moment's silence, during which Travers smoked, and the Major seemed to hesitate. Finally the latter asked:

"What is your name, Sergeant?"

"Hamlin, sir."

The pipe came out of Travers' mouth, and he half arose to his feet.

"By all the gods!" he exclaimed. "That's it! Now I've got you placed — you're — you're 'Brick' Hamlin!"

The man unconsciously put one hand to his hair, his eyes laughing.

"Some of the boys call me that — yes," he confessed apologetically.

Travers was on his feet now, gesticulating with his pipe.

"Damn! I knew I'd seen your face somewhere. It was two years ago at Washita. Say, Dan, this is

smoke. As the Major concluded, Hamlin asked a question or two gravely.

"How old is your daughter, sir?"

"In her twentieth year."

"Have you a picture of the young lady?"

The Major crossed over to his fatigue coat hanging on the wall, and extracted a small photograph from an inside pocket.

"This was taken a year ago," he explained, "and was considered a good likeness then."

Hamlin took the card in his hands, studied the face a moment, and then placed it upon the table.

"You figure she ought to leave Ripley on the 18th," he said slowly. "Then I shall need to start at once to make Dodge in time."

"You mean to go then? Of course, you realize I have no authority to order you on such private service."

"That 's true. I 'm a volunteer, but I 'll ask you for a written order just the same in case my Troop commander should ever object, and I 'll need a fresh horse; I rode mine pretty hard coming up here."

"You shall have the pick of the stables, Sergeant," interjected the cavalry captain, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Anything else? Have you had rest enough?"

"Four hours," and the Sergeant stood up again. "All I require will be two days' rations, and a few more revolver cartridges. The sooner I 'm off the better."

If he heard Travers' attempt at conversation as the two stumbled together down the dark hill, he paid small attention. At the stables, aided by a smoky lantern, he picked out a tough-looking buckskin mustang, with an evil eye; and, using his own saddle and bridle, he finally led the half-broken animal outside.

"That buckskin 's the devil's own," protested Travers, careful to keep well to one side.

"I 'll take it out of him before morning," was the reply. "Come on, boy! easy now — easy! How about the rations, Captain?"

"Carter will have them for you at the gate of the stockade. Do you know the trail?"

"Well enough to follow — yes."

McDonald was waiting with Carter, and the dim gleam of the lantern revealed his face.

"Remember, Sergeant, you are to make her turn back if you can. Tell her I wish her to do so — yes, this letter will explain everything, but she is a pretty high-spirited girl, and may take the bit in her teeth — imagine she 'd rather be here with me, and all that.

If she does I suppose you 'll have to let her have her own way — the Lord knows her mother always did. Anyhow you 'll stay with her till she 's safe."

"I sure will," returned the Sergeant, gathering up his reins. "Good-bye to you."

"Good-bye and good luck," and McDonald put out his hand, which the other took hesitatingly. The next instant he was in the saddle, and with a wild leap the startled mustang rounded the edge of the bluff, flying into the night.

All had occurred so quickly that Hamlin's mind had not yet fully adjusted itself to all the details. He was naturally a man of few words, deciding on a course of action quietly, yet not apt to deviate from any conclusion finally reached. But he had been hurried, pressed into this adventure, and now welcomed an opportunity to think it all out coolly. At first, for a half mile or more, the plunging buckskin kept him busy, bucking viciously, rearing, leaping madly from side to side, practising every known equine trick to dislodge the grim rider in the saddle. The man fought out the battle silently, immovable as a rock, and apparently as indifferent. Twice his spurs brought blood, and once he struck the rearing head with clenched fist. The light of the stars revealed the faint lines of the trail,

and he was content to permit the maddened brute to race forward, until, finally mastered, the animal settled down into a swift gallop, but with ears laid back in ugly defiance. The rider's gray eyes smiled pleasantly as he settled more comfortably into the saddle, peering out from beneath the stiff brim of his scouting hat; then they hardened, and the man swore softly under his breath.

The peculiar nature of this mission which he had taken upon himself had been recalled. He was always doing something like that — permitting himself to become involved in the affairs of others. Now why should he be here, riding alone through the dark to prevent this unknown girl from reaching Devere? She was nothing to him — even that glimpse of her pictured face had not impressed him greatly; rather interesting, to be sure, but nothing extraordinary; besides he was not a woman's man, and, through years of isolation, had grown to avoid contact with the sex — and he was under no possible obligation to either McDonald or Travers. Yet here he was, fully committed, drawn into the vortex, by a hasty ill-considered decision. He was tired still from his swift journey across the desert from Fort Union, and now faced another three days' ride. Then what? A headstrong

girl to be convinced of danger, and controlled. The longer he thought about it all, the more intensely disagreeable the task appeared, yet the clearer did he appreciate its necessity. He chafed at the knowledge that it had become his work — that he had permitted himself to be ensnared — yet he dug his spurs into the mustang and rode steadily, grimly, forward.

The real truth was that Hamlin comprehended much more fully than did the men at Devere the danger menacing travellers along the main trail to Santa Fé. News reached Fort Union much quicker than it did that isolated post up on the Cimarron. He knew of the fight in Raton Pass, and that two stages within ten days had been attacked, one several miles east of Bent's Fort. This must mean that a desperate party of raiders had succeeded in slipping past those scattered army details scouting into the Northwest. Whether or not these warriors were in any considerable force he could not determine — the reports of their depredations were but rumors at Union when he left — yet, whether in large body or small, they would have a clear run in the Arkansas Valley before any troops could be gathered together to drive them out. Perhaps even now, the stages had been withdrawn, communication with Santa Fé abandoned. This had been spoken of

as possible at Union the night he left, for it was well known there that there was no cavalry force left at Dodge which could be utilized as guards. The wide map of the surrounding region spread out before him in memory; he felt its brooding desolation, its awful loneliness. Nevertheless he must go on — perhaps at the stage station near the ford of the Arkansas he could learn the truth. So he bent lower over the buckskin's neck and rode straight through the black, silent night.

It was a waterless desert stretching between the Cimarron and the Arkansas, consisting of almost a dead level of alkali and sand, although toward the northern extremity the sand had been driven by the ceaseless wind into grotesque hummocks. The trail, cut deep by traders' wagons earlier in the spring, was still easily traceable for a greater part of the distance, and Hamlin as yet felt no need of caution — this was a country the Indians would avoid, the only danger being from some raiding party from the south. At early dawn he came trotting down into the Arkansas Valley, and gazed across at the greenness of the opposite bank. There, plainly in view, were the deep ruts of the main trail running close in against the bluff. His tired eyes caught no symbol of life either up or down the stream,

except a thin spiral of blue smoke that slowly wound its way upward. An instant he stared, believing it to be the fire of some emigrant's camp; then realized that he looked upon the smouldering débris of the stage station.

CHAPTER III

THE NEWS AT RIPLEY

MISS MOLLY McDONALD had departed for the West — carefully treasuring her father's detailed letter of instruction — filled with interest and enthusiasm. She was an army girl, full of confidence in herself and delighted at the prospect of an unusual summer. Moreover, her natural spirit of adventure had been considerably stimulated by the envious comments of her schoolmates, who apparently believed her wondrously daring to venture such a trip, the apprehensive advice of her teachers, and much reading, not very judiciously chosen, relative to pioneer life on the plains. The possible hardships of the long journey alone did not appall her in the least. She had made similar trips before and had always found pleasant and attentive companionship. Being a wholesome, pleasant-faced girl, with eyes decidedly beautiful, and an attractive personality, the making of new friendships was never difficult. Of course the stage ride would be an entirely fresh and precarious experience, but then her

father would doubtless meet her before that, or send some officer to act as escort. Altogether the prospect appeared most delightful and alluring.

The illness of the principal of Sunnycrest had resulted in the closing of the school some few days earlier than had been anticipated, and it was so lonely there after the others had departed that Miss Molly hastened her packing and promptly joined the exodus. Why not? She could wait the proper date at Kansas City or Fort Ripley just as well, enjoying herself meanwhile amid a new environment, and no doubt she would encounter some of her father's army friends who would help entertain her pleasantly. Miss McDonald was somewhat impulsive, and, her interest once aroused, impatient of restraint.

As a result of this earlier departure she reached Ripley some two days in advance of the prearranged schedule, and in spite of her young strength and enthusiasm, most thoroughly tired out by the strain of continuous travel. Her one remaining desire upon arrival was for a bed, and actuated by this necessity, when she learned that the army post was fully two miles from the town, she accepted proffered guidance to the famous Gilsey House and promptly fell asleep. The light of a new day gave her a first real glimpse of the

surrounding dreariness as she stood looking out through the grimy glass of her single window, depressed and heartsick. The low, rolling hills, bare and desolate, stretched to the horizon, the grass already burned brown by the sun. The town itself consisted of but one short, crooked street, flanked by rough, ramshackle frame structures, two-thirds of these apparently saloons, with dirty, flapping tents sandwiched between, and huge piles of tin cans and other rubbish stored away behind. The street was rutted and dusty, and the ceaseless wind swirled the dirt about in continuous, suffocating clouds. The hotel itself, a little, squatty, two-storied affair, groaned to the blast, threatening to collapse. Nothing moved except a wagon down the long ribbon of road, and a dog digging for a bone behind a near-by tent. It was so squalid and ugly she turned away in speechless disgust.

The interior, however, offered even smaller comfort. A rude bedstead, one leg considerably short and propped up by a half brick, stood against the board wall; a single wooden chair was opposite, and a fly-specked mirror hung over a tin basin and pitcher. The floor sagged fearfully and the side walls lacked several inches of reaching the ceiling. Even in the dim candle light of the evening before, the bed coverings had

looked so forbidding that Molly had compromised, lying down, half-dressed on the outside; now, in the garish glare of returning day they appeared positively filthy. And this was the best to be had; she realized that, her courage failing at the thought of remaining alone amid such surroundings. As she washed, using a towel of her own after a single glance at the hotel article, and did up her rebellious hair, she came to a prompt decision. She would go directly on — would take the first stage. Perhaps her father, or whomever he sent, would be met with along the route. The coaches had regular meeting stations, so there was small danger of their missing each other. Even if she was compelled to wait over at Fort Dodge, the environment there could certainly be no more disagreeable than this.

The question of possible danger was dismissed almost without serious thought. She had seen no papers since leaving St. Louis, and the news before that contained nothing more definite than rumors of uneasiness among the Plains Indians. Army officers interviewed rather made light of the affair, as being merely the regular outbreak of young warriors, easily suppressed. On the train she had met with no one who treated the situation as really serious, and, if it was, then surely her

father would send some message of restraint. Satisfied upon this point, and fully determined upon departing at the earliest opportunity, she ventured down the narrow, creaking stairs in search of breakfast.

The dining-room was discovered at the foot of the steps, a square box of a place, the two narrow windows looking forth on the desolate prairie. There were three long tables, but only one was in use, and, with no waiter to guide her, the girl advanced hesitatingly and took a seat opposite the two men already present. They glanced up, curiously interested, staring at her a moment, and then resumed their interrupted meal. Miss McDonald's critical eyes surveyed the unsavory-looking food, her lips slightly curving, and then glanced inquiringly toward the men. The one directly opposite was large and burly, with iron-gray hair and beard, about sixty years of age, but with red cheeks and bright eyes, and a face expressive of hearty good nature. His clothing was roughly serviceable, but he looked clean and wholesome. The other was an army lieutenant, but Molly promptly quelched her first inclination to address him, as she noted his red, inflamed face and dissipated appearance. As she nibbled, half-heartedly, at the miserable food brought by a slovenly waiter, the two men exchanged barely a dozen words,

the lieutenant growling out monosyllabic answers, finally pushing back his chair, and striding out. Again the girl glanced across at the older man, mustering courage to address him. At the same moment he looked up, with eyes full of good humor and kindly interest.

"Looks rather tough, I reckon, miss," waving a big hand over the table. "But you 'll have ter git used to it in this kentry."

"Oh, I do not believe I ever could," disconsolately. "I can scarcely choke down a mouthful."

"So I was noticin'; from the East, I reckon?"

"Yes; I — I came last night, and — and really I am afraid I am actually homesick already. It — it is even more — more primitive than I supposed. Do — do you live here — at Ripley?"

"Good Lord, no!" heartily, "though I reckon yer might not think my home wuz much better. I 'm the post-trader down at Fort Marcy, jist out o' Santa Fé. I 'll be blame glad ter git back thar too, I 'm a tellin' yer."

"That — that is what I wished to ask you about," she stammered. "The Santa Fé stage; when does it leave here? and — and where do I arrange for passage?"

He dropped knife and fork, staring at her across the table.

"Good Lord, miss," he exclaimed swiftly. "Do yer mean to say ye 're goin' to make that trip alone?"

"Oh, not to Santa Fé; only as far as the stage station at the Arkansas crossing," she exclaimed hastily. "I am going to join my father; he — he commands a post on the Cimarron — Major McDonald."

"Well, I 'll be damned," said the man slowly, so surprised that he forgot himself. "Babes in the wilderness; what, in Heaven's name, ever induced yer dad to let yer come on such a fool trip? Isn't thar no one to meet yer here, or at Dodge?"

"I — I don't know," she confessed. "Father was going to come, or else send one of his officers, but I have seen no one. I am here two days earlier than was expected, and — and I have n't heard from my father since last month. See, this is his last letter; won't you read it, please, and tell me what I ought to do?"

The man took the letter, and read the three pages carefully, and then turned back to note the date, before handing the sheets across the table.

"The Major sure made his instructions plain enough," he said slowly. "And yer have n't heard from him since, or seen any one he sent to meet yer?"

The girl shook her head slowly.

"Well, that ain't to be wondered at, either," he went on. "Things has changed some out yere since that letter was wrote. I reckon yer know we 're havin' a bit o' Injun trouble, an' yer dad is shore to be pretty busy out thar on the Cimarron."

"I — I do not think I do. I have seen no papers since leaving St. Louis. Is the situation really serious? Is it unsafe for me to go farther?"

The man rubbed his chin, as though undecided what was best to say. But the girl's face was full of character, and he answered frankly.

"It 's serious 'nough, I reckon, an' I certainly wish I wus safe through to Fort Marcy, but I don't know no reason now why you could n't finish up your trip all right. I wus out to the fort last evenin' gettin' the latest news, an' thar has n't been no trouble to speak of east of old Bent's Fort. Between thar and Union, thar 's a bunch o' Mescalo Apaches raisin' thunder. One lot got as far as the Caches, an' burned a wagon train, but were run back into the mount'ns. Troops are out along both sides the Valley, an' thar ain't been no stage held up, nor station attacked along the Arkansas. I reckon yer pa 'll have an escort waitin' at the crossin'?"

"Of course he will; what I am most afraid of is that I might miss him or his messenger on the route."

"Not likely; there 's only two stages a week each way, an' they have regular meeting points."

She sat quiet, eyes lowered to the table, thinking. She liked the man, and trusted him; he seemed kindly deferential. Finally she looked up.

"When do you go?"

"To-day. I was goin' to wait 'bout yere a week longer, but am gitting skeered they might quit runnin' their coaches. To tell the truth, miss, it looks some to me like thar wus a big Injun war comin', and I 'd like ter git home whar I belong afore it breaks loose."

"Will — will you take me with you?"

He moistened his lips, his hands clasping and unclasping on the table.

"Sure, if yer bound ter go. I 'll do the best I kin fer yer, an' I reckon ther sooner yer start the better chance ye 'll have o' gittin' through safe." He hesitated. "If we should git bad news at Dodge, is there anybody thar, at the fort, you could stop with?"

"Colonel Carver."

"He 's not thar now; been transferred to Wallace, but, I reckon, any o' those army people would look

after yer. Ye 've really made up yer mind to try it, then? "

"Yes, yes; I positively cannot stay here. I shall go as far as Dodge at least. If — if we are going to travel together, I ought to know your name."

"Sure yer had," with a laugh. "I fergot all 'bout that — it 's Moylan, miss; William Moylan; 'Sutler Bill' they call me mostly, west o' the river. Let 's go out an' see 'bout thet stage."

As he rounded the table, Molly rose to her feet, and held out her hand.

"I am so glad I spoke to you, Mr. Moylan," she said simply. "I am not at all afraid now. If you will wait until I get my hat, I 'll be down in a minute."

"Sutler Bill" stood in the narrow hall watching her run swiftly upstairs, twirling his hat in his hands, his good-natured face flushed. Once he glanced in the direction of the bar-room, wiping his lips with his cuff, and his feet shuffled. But he resisted the temptation, and was still there when Miss McDonald came down.

CHAPTER IV

THE ATTACK

SLIGHTLY more than sixty miles, as the route ran, stretched between old Fort Dodge and the ford crossing the Arkansas leading down to the Cimarron; another sixty miles distant, across a desert of alkali and sand, lay Devere. The main Santa Fé trail, broad and deeply rutted by the innumerable wheels of early spring caravans, followed the general course of the river, occasionally touching the higher level plains, but mostly keeping close beneath the protection of the northern bluffs, or else skirting the edge of the water. Night or day the route was easily followed, and, in other years, the traveller was seldom for long out of sight of toiling wagons. Now scarcely a wheel turned in all that lonely distance.

The west-bound stage left the station at Deer Creek at four o'clock in the afternoon with no intimation of danger ahead. Its occupants had eaten dinner in company with those of the east-bound coach, eighteen miles down the river at Cañon Bluff, and the in-coming

driver had reported an open road, and no unusual trouble. No Indian signs had been observed, not even signal fires during the night, and the conductor, who had come straight from Santa Fé, reported that troops from Fort Union had driven the only known bunch of raiders back from the neighborhood of the trail, and had them already safely corralled in the mountains. This report, seemingly authentic and official, served to relax the nerves, and the west-bound driver sang to himself as he guided the four horses forward, while the conductor, a sawed-off gun planted between his knees, nodded drowsily. Inside there were but three passengers, jerking back and forth, as the wheels struck the deep ruts of the trail, occasionally exchanging a word or two, but usually staring gloomily forth at the monotonous scene. Miss McDonald and Moylan occupied the back seat, some baggage wedged tightly between to keep them more secure on the slippery cushion, while facing them, and clinging to his support with both hands, was a pock-marked Mexican, with rather villainous face and ornate dress, and excessively polite manners. He had joined the little party at Dodge, smiling happily at sight of Miss Molly's face when she unveiled, although his small knowledge of English prevented any extended effort at conversation. Moylan,

however, after careful scrutiny, engaged him shortly in Spanish, and later explained to the girl, in low tones, that the man was a Santa Fé gambler known as Gonzales, with a reputation to be hinted at but not openly discussed.

They were some six miles to the west of Deer Creek, the horses still moving with spirit, the driver's foot on the brake, when the stage took a sudden plunge down a sloping bank where the valley perceptibly narrowed. To the left, beyond a flat expanse of brown, sun-scorched grass, flowed the widely-spreading waters of the Arkansas, barely covering the treacherous sandy bottom, and from the other side came the more distant gleam of alkali plains; to the right arose the bluffs, here both steep and rugged, completely shutting off the view, barren of vegetation except for a few scattered patches of grass. Suddenly a man rode out of a rift in the bank, directly in front, and held up his hand. Surprised, startled, the driver instantaneously clamped on his brake, and brought his horses to a quick stop; the conductor, nearly flung from his seat, yanked his gun forward.

"None of that now," called out the man in saddle quickly, both hands uplifted to show their emptiness. "This is no hold-up. I 've got news."

He spurred his pony forward slowly, the animal seemingly barely able to move, and swung out of the saddle beside the front wheel, staggering a bit as though his limbs were cramped as his feet felt the ground.

"I'm from Fort Union," he said, "Seventh Cavalry, sent through by way of Cimarron Springs. There is hell to pay west of here; the stations at Arkansas Crossing and Low Water were burned last night."

"The devil you say," burst out the driver hoarsely, his startled eyes sweeping the horizon. "Injuns?"

"Sure, plenty of signs, but I have n't seen any bucks myself. As soon as I discovered what had happened at the Crossing I struck out on to the plateau, and came around that way to warn those fellows at Low Water. But when I got sight of that station from off the bluffs yonder it had been wiped out. Then I thought about this stage going west to-day, and came on to meet you. Must have ridden a hundred an' twenty miles since yesterday; the mustang is all in."

Moylan stuck his head out the nearest window.

"Look like they had much of a fight at the Crossing?" he asked.

"Not much; more like a night raid; two whites killed, and scalped. The third man either was taken

away, or his body got burnt in the building. Horses all gone."

"What tribe?"

"Arapahoes, from the way they scalped; that 's what made it so serious — if those Northern Indians have broken loose there is going to be war this time for sure."

The men on the box looked at each other questioningly.

"I don't see no use tryin' to go on, Jake, do you?" asked the driver soberly. "Even if we do git through, thar ain't no hosses to be had."

The other shook his head, rubbing his gun-stock.

"Most likely those same red devils are layin' for us now somewhar between yere an' Low Water; whar the trail runs in between them two big rocks, most probable," he concluded. "Not havin' no ha'r to lose, I 'm fer goin' back."

With an oath of relief, the driver released his brake, and skilfully swung the leaders around, the coach groaning as it took the sharp turn. The man on the ground caught a swiftly passing glimpse of the young woman's face within, and strode hurriedly forward as the coach started.

"Hold on there, pardner," he commanded sternly.

" This poor bronc' won't travel another mile. There 's plenty of room for me inside, and I 'll turn the tired devil loose. Hold on, I say! "

The driver once again slapped on the brake, growling and reluctant, his anxious eyes searching the trail in both directions. Hamlin quietly uncinched his saddle, flinging it to the coach roof; the bridle followed, and then, with a slap on the haunch of the released animal, he strode to the stage door, thrust his Henry rifle within, and took the vacant seat beside Gonzales. With a sudden crack of the driver's whip the four horses leaped forward, and the coach careened on the slope of the trail, causing the passengers to clutch wildly to keep from being precipitated into a mass on the floor. As the traces straightened, Miss Molly, clinging desperately to a strap, caught her first fair glance at the newcomer. His hat was tilted back, the light revealing lines of weariness and a coating of the gray, powdery dust of the alkali desert, but beneath it appeared the brown, sun-scorched skin, while the gray eyes looking straight at her, were resolute and smiling. His rough shirt, open at the throat, might have been the product of any sutler's counter; he wore no jacket, and the broad yellow stripe down the leg of the faded blue trousers alone proclaimed him a soldier. He

smiled across at her, and she lowered her eyes, while his glance wandered on toward the others.

"Don't seem to be very crowded to-day," he began, genially addressing Moylan. "Not an extremely popular route at present, I reckon. Mining, pardner?"

"No; post-trader at Fort Marcy."

"Oh, that's it," his eyebrows lifting slightly. "This Indian business is a bad job for you then." His eyes fell on his seatmate. "Well, if this is n't little Gonzales! — You 've got a good ways from home."

"Si, señor!" returned the Mexican brokenly. "I tink I not remem."

"No, I reckon not. I 'm not one of your class; cards and I never did agree. I shut up your game once down at Union; night Hassinger was killed. Remember now, don't you?"

"Si, señor," spreading his hands. "It was mos' unfortunate."

"Would have been more so, if the boys had got hold of you — Saint Anne! but that fellow on the box is driving some."

The thud of the horses' feet under the lash, coupled with the reckless lurching of the coach, ended all further attempt at conversation, and the four passengers

held on grimly, and stared out of the windows, as if expecting every instant that some accident would hurl them headlong. The frightened driver was apparently sparing neither whip nor tongue, the galloping teams jerking the stage after them in a mad race up the trail. Hamlin thrust his head out of the nearest window, but a sudden lurch hurled him back, the coach taking a sharp curve on two wheels, and coming down level once again with a bump which brought the whole four together. The little Mexican started to scream out a Spanish oath, but Hamlin gripped his throat before it was half uttered, while Moylan pressed the girl back into her seat, bracing himself to hold her firm.

"What the devil—" he began angrily, and then the careening coach stopped as suddenly as though it had struck the bank, again tearing loose their handhold on the seats and flinging them headlong. They heard the creaking clamp of the brakes, the dancing of frightened horses, a perfect volley of oaths, the crunch of feet as men leaped from the top to the ground; then, all at once, the stage lurched forward, swerving sharply to the left, and struck out across the flat directly toward the bluff.

Hamlin struggled to the nearest window, and, grasping the sill to hold himself upright, leaned out.

He caught a momentary glimpse of two men riding swiftly up the trail; the box above was empty, the wheelers alone remained in harness, and they were running uncontrolled.

"By God!" he muttered. "Those two damn cowards have cut loose and left us!"

Even as the unrestrained words leaped from his lips, he realized the only hope — the reins still dangled, caught securely in the brake lever. Inch by inch, foot by foot, he wiggled out; Moylan, comprehending, caught his legs, holding him steady against the mad pitching. His fingers gripped the iron top rail, and, exerting all his strength, he slowly pulled his body up, until he fell forward into the driver's seat. Swift as he had been, the action was not quickly enough conceived to avert disaster. He had the reins in his grip when the swinging pole struck the steep side of the bluff, snapping off with a sharp crack, and flinging down the frightened animals, the wheels crashing against them, as the coach came to a sudden halt. Hamlin hung on grimly, flung forward to the foot-rail by the force of the shock, his body bruised and aching. One horse lay motionless, head under, apparently instantly killed; his mate struggled to his feet, tore frantically loose from the traces, and went

flying madly down the slope, the broken harness dangling at its heels. The Sergeant sat up and stared about, sweeping the blood from a slight gash out of his eyes. Then he came to himself with a gasp — understanding instantly what it all meant, why those men had cut loose the horses and ridden away, why the wheelers had plunged forward in that mad run-away race — between the bluffs and the river a swarm of Indians were lashing their ponies, spreading out like the sticks of a fan.

CHAPTER V

THE DEFENCE OF THE STAGE

THERE were times when Hamlin's mental processes seemed slow, almost sluggish, but this was never true in moments of emergency and peril. Then he became swift, impetuous, seemingly borne forward by some inspiring instinct. It was for such experiences as this that he remained in the service — his whole nature responding almost joyously to the bugle-call of action, of imminent danger, his nerves steadying into rock. These were the characteristics which had won him his chevrons in the unrewarded service of the frontier, and, when scarcely more than a boy, had put a captain's bars on the gray collar of his Confederate uniform.

Now, as he struggled to his knees, gripping the iron foot-rail with one hand, a single glance gave him a distinct impression of their desperate situation. With that knowledge, there likewise flashed over his mind the only possible means of defence. The Indians, numbering at least thirty, had ridden recklessly out from

under the protection of the river bank, spreading to right and left, as their ponies' hoofs struck the turf, and were now charging down upon the disabled coach, yelling madly and brandishing their guns. The very reckless abandon of their advance expressed the conception they had of the situation — they had witnessed the flight of the two fugitives, the runaway of the wheelers, and believed the remaining passengers would be helpless victims. They came on, savage and confident, not anticipating a fight, but a massacre — shrieking prisoners, and a glut of revenge.

With one swing of his body, Hamlin was upon the ground, and had jerked open the inside door of the coach, forcing it back against the dirt of the bluff which towered in protection above. His eyes were quick to perceive the peculiar advantage of position; that their assailants would be compelled to advance from only one direction. The three within were barely struggling to their feet, dazed, bewildered, failing as yet to comprehend fully those distant yells, when he sprang into their midst, uttering his swift orders, and unceremoniously jerking the men into position for defence.

"Here, quick now! Don't waste time! It's a matter of seconds, I tell you! They're coming — a horde of them. Here, Moylan, take this rifle barrel

and knock a hole through the back there big enough to sight out of. Hit it hard, damn you, it 's a case of life or death! What have you got, Gonzales? A revolver? Into that window there, and blaze away; you 've got the reputation of a gun-man; now let 's see you prove it. Get back in the corner, miss, so I can slip past — no, lie down below the fire line!"

"But — but I will not!" and she faced him, her face white, but her eyes shining. "I can shoot! See!" and she flashed a pearl-handled revolver defiantly. The Sergeant thrust her unceremoniously aside and plunged across to the opposite window, gripping his Henry rifle.

"Do as I say," he growled. "This is our fight. Get down! Now, you terriers, let them have it!"

There was a wild skurrying of mounted figures almost at the coach wheels, hair streaming, feathers waving, lean, red arms thrown up, the air vocal with shrill outcries — then the dull bark of a Henry, the boom of a Winchester, the sharp spitting of a Colt. The smoke rolled out in a cloud, pungent, concealing, nervous fingers pressing the triggers again and again. They could see reeling horses, men gripping their ponies' manes to keep erect, staring, frightened eyes, animals flung back on their haunches, rearing madly

in the air. The fierce yell of exultation changed into a savage scream, bullets crashed into the thin sides of the coach; it rocked with the contact of a half-naked body flung forward by a plunging horse; the Mexican swore wildly in Spanish, and then — the smoke blew aside and they saw the field; the dead and dying ponies, three motionless bodies huddled on the grass, a few dismounted stragglers racing on foot for the river bank, and a squad of riders circling beyond the trail. Hamlin swept the mingled sweat and blood out of his eyes, smiled grimly, and glanced back into the coach, instinctively slipping fresh cartridges into his hot rifle.

"That 's one time those fellows ran into a hornet's nest," he commented quietly, all trace of excitement vanished. "Better load up, boys, for we 're not through yet — they 'll only be more careful next time. Anybody hurt?"

"Somethin' creased my back," replied Moylan, complainingly, and trying vainly to put a hand on the spot. "Felt like a streak o' fire." The Sergeant reached across, fingering the torn shirt curiously.

"Seared the flesh, pardner, but no blood worth mentioning. They 've got some heavy artillery out there from the sound — old army muskets likely. It

is our repeating rifles that will win out — those red devils don't understand them yet."

"Señor, you tink we win out den?" and Gonzales peered up blinking into the other's face. "Sacre! dey vil fight deeferent de nex' time. Ze Americaine muskeet, eet carry so far — ess eet not so?"

Hamlin patted his brown barrel affectionately as if it were an old friend, and smiled across into the questioning eyes of the girl.

"I 'm willing to back this weapon against the best of them for distance," he replied easily, "and it 's accurate besides. How about it, Moylan?"

"I 'd about as soon be in front as behind one of them cannon," answered the sutler soberly. "I toted one four years. But say, pardner, what 's yer name? Yer a cavalryman, ain't yer?"

"Sergeant — forgot I was n't properly introduced," and he bent his head slightly, glancing again toward the girl. "Hamlin is the rest of it."

"'Brick' Hamlin?"

"Sometimes — delicate reference to my hair, miss," and he took off his hat, his gray eyes laughing. "Born that way, but does n't seem to interfere with me much, since I was a kid. You 've heard of me then, Moylan? So has our little friend, Gonzales, here."

The sober-faced sutler merely nodded, evidently in no mood for pleasantry.

"Oh, ye 're all right," he said finally. "I 've heard 'em say you was a fighter down round Santa Fé, an' I know it myself now. But what the hell are we goin' to do? This yere stagecoach ain't much of a fort to keep off a bunch o' redskins once they git their mad up. Them musket bullets go through like the sides was paper, an' I reckon we ain't got no oversupply o' ammunition — I know I ain't fer this Winchester. How long do yer reckon we kin hold out?"

Hamlin's face became grave, his eyes also turning toward the river. The sun was already sinking low in the west, and the Indians, gathered in council out of rifle-shot, were like shadows against the glimmering water beyond.

"They 'll try us again just before dark," he affirmed slowly, "but more cautiously. If that attack fails, then they 'll endeavor to creep in, and take us by surprise. It 's going to be a clear night, and there is small chance for even an Indian to hide in that buffalo-grass with the stars shining. They have got to come up from below, for no buck could climb down this bluff without making a noise. I don't see why,

with decent luck, we can't hold out as we are until help gets here; those fellows who rode away will report at Cañon Bluff and send a rider on to Dodge for help. There ought to be soldiers out here by noon to-morrow. What troops are at Dodge now?"

"Only a single company — infantry," replied Moylan gloomily. "All the rest are out scouting 'long the Solomon. Damned if I believe they 'll send us a man. Those two cowards will likely report us all dead — otherwise they would n't have any excuse for runnin' away — and the commander will satisfy himself by sendin' a courier to the fellers in the field."

"Well, then," commented the Sergeant, his eyes gleaming, "we 've simply got to fight it out alone, I reckon, and hang on to our last shots. What do you make of those reds?"

The three men stared for some time at the distant group over their rifles, in silence.

"They ain't all Arapahoes, that 's certain," said Moylan at last. "Some of 'em are Cheyennes. I 've seen that chief before — it 's Roman Nose."

"The big buck humped up on the roan?"

"That 's the one, and he is a bad actor; saw him once over at Fort Kearney two years ago. Had a council there. Say!" in surprise, "ain't that an

Ogalla Sioux war bonnet bobbin' there to the right, Sergeant?"

Hamlin studied the distant feathered head-dress indicated, shading his eyes with one hand.

"I reckon maybe it is, Moylan," he acknowledged at last gravely. "Those fellows have evidently got together; we 're going to have the biggest scrap this summer the old army has had yet. Looks as though it was going to begin right here — and now. See there! The dance is on, boys; there they come; they will try it on foot this time."

He tested his rifle, resting one knee on the seat; Moylan pushed the barrel of his Winchester out through the ragged hole in the back of the coach, and the little Mexican lay flat, his eyes on the level with the window-casing. The girl alone remained motionless, crouched on the floor, her white face uplifted.

The entire field stretching to the river was clear to the view, the short, dry buffalo-grass offering no concealment. To the right of the coach, some fifty feet away, was the only depression, a shallow gully leading down from the bluff, but this slight advantage was unavailable. The sun had already dropped from view, and the gathering twilight distorted the figures, mak-

ing them almost grotesque in their savagery. Yet they could be clearly distinguished, stealing silently forward, guns in hand, spreading out in a wide half-circle, obedient to the gestures of Roman Nose, who, still mounted upon his pony, was traversing the river bank, his every motion outlined against the dull gleam of water behind him. From the black depths of the coach the three men watched in almost breathless silence, gripping their weapons, fascinated, determined not to waste a shot. Gonzales, under the strain, uttered a fierce Spanish curse, but Hamlin crushed his arm between iron fingers.

"Keep still, you fool!" he muttered, never glancing around. "Let your gun talk!"

The assailants came creeping on, snakes rather than men, appearing less and less human in the increasing shadows. Twice the Sergeant lifted his Henry, sighting along the brown barrel, lowering the weapon again in doubt of the distance. He was conscious of exultation, of a swifter pulse of the heart, yet his nerves were like steel, his grip steady. Only a dim fleeting memory of the girl, half hidden in the darkness behind, gave him uneasiness — he could not turn and look into her eyes. Roman Nose was advancing now at the centre of that creeping half circle, a hulking figure perched on his

pony's back, yet well out of rifle range. He spread his hands apart, clasping a blanket, looking like a great bird flapping its wings, and the ground in front flamed, the red flare splitting the gray gloom. The speeding bullets crashed through the leather of the coach, splintering the wood; the Mexican rolled to the floor, uttering one inhuman cry, and lay motionless; a great volume of black smoke wavered in the still air.

"Wait! Wait until they get to their feet!" Hamlin cried eagerly. "Ah! there they come — now unlimber."

He saw only those black, indistinct figures, leaping out of the smoke, converging on the coach, their naked arms uplifted, their voices mingling in savage yells. Like lightning he worked his rifle, heart throbbing to the excitement, oblivious to all else; almost without realization he heard the deeper bellow of Moylan's Winchester, the sharp bark of a revolver at his very ear. Gonzales was all right, then! Good! He never thought of the girl, never saw her grip the pistol from the Mexican's dead hand, and crawl white-faced, over his body, to that front seat. All he really knew was that those devils were coming, leaping, crowding through the smoke wreathes; he saw them stumble, and rise again; he saw one leap into the air, and then crash

face down; he saw them break, circling to right and left, crouching as they ran. Two reached the stage — only two! One pitched forward, a revolver bullet between his eyes, his head wedged in the spokes of the wheel; the other Hamlin struck with emptied rifle-barrel as his red hand gripped the door, sending him sprawling back into the dirt. It was all the work of a minute, an awful minute, intense, breathless — then silence, the smoke drifting away, the dark night hiding the skulking runners.

CHAPTER VI

THE CONDITION IN THE COACH

MECHANICALLY — scarcely conscious of the action — the Sergeant slipped fresh cartridges into the hot rifle chamber, swept the tumbled hair out of his eyes with his shirt sleeve, and stared into the night. He could hardly comprehend yet that the affair was ended, the second attack repulsed. It was like a delirium of fever; he almost expected to see those motionless bodies outstretched on the grass spring up, yelling defiance. Then he gripped himself firmly, realizing the truth — it was over with for the present: away off there in the haze obscuring the river bank those indistinct black smudges were fleeing savages, their voices wailing through the night. Just in front, formless, huddled where they had fallen, were the bodies of dead and dying, smitten ponies and half-naked men. He drew a deep breath through clinched teeth, endeavoring to distinguish his comrades.

The interior of the coach was black, and soundless, except for some one's swift, excited breathing. As he

extended his cramped leg to the floor he touched a motionless body. Not until then had he realized the possibility of death also within. He felt downward with one hand, his nerves suddenly throbbing, and his finger touched a cold face — the Mexican. It must have been that last volley, for he could distinctly recall the sharp bark of Gonzales' revolver between his own shots.

"The little devil," he muttered soberly. "It was a squarer death than he deserved. He was a game little cock."

Then he thought of Moylan, wondering why the man did not move, or speak. That was not like Moylan. He bent forward, half afraid in the stillness, endeavoring to discover space on the floor for both his feet. He could perceive now a distant star showing clear through the ragged opening jabbed in the back of the coach, but no outline of the sutler's burly shoulders.

"Moylan!" he called, hardly above a whisper. "What is the trouble? Have you been hit, man?"

There was no answer, no responding sound, and he stood up, reaching kindly over across the seat. Then he knew, and felt a shudder run through him from head to foot. Bent double over the iron back of the

middle seat, with hands still gripping his hot rifle, the man hung, limp and lifeless. Almost without realizing the act, Hamlin lifted the heavy body, laid it down upon the cushion, and unclasped the dead fingers gripping the Winchester stock.

"Every shot gone," he whispered to himself dazedly, "every shot gone! Ain't that hell!"

Then it came to him in a sudden flash of intelligence — he was alone; alone except for the girl. They were out there yet, skulking in the night, planning revenge, those savage foemen — Arapahoes, Cheyennes, Ogallas. They had been beaten back, defeated, smitten with death, but they were Indians still. They would come back for the bodies of their slain, and then — what? They could not know who were living, who dead, in the coach; yet must have discovered long since that it had only contained three defenders. They would guess that ammunition would be limited. His knowledge of the fighting tactics of the Plains tribes gave clear vision of what would probably occur. They would wait, scattered out in a wide circle from bluff to bluff, lying snake-like in the grass. Some of the bolder might creep in to drag away the bodies of dead warriors, risking a chance shot, but there would be no open attack in the dark. That would be averse

to all Indian strategy, all precedent. Even now the mournful wailing had ceased; Roman Nose had rallied his warriors, instilled into them his own unconquerable savagery, and set them on watch. With the first gray dawn they would come again, leaping to the coach's wheels, yelling, triumphant, mad with new ferocity — and he was alone, except for the girl.

And where was she? He felt for her on the floor, but only touched the Mexican's feet. He had to lean across the seat where Moylan's body lay, shrouded in darkness, before his groping fingers came in contact with the skirt of her dress. She was on the front seat, close to the window; against the lightness of the outer sky, her head seemed lying upon the wooden frame. She did not move, he could not even tell that she breathed, and for an instant his dry lips failed him utterly, his blood seemed to stop. Good God! Had she been killed also? How, in Heaven's name, did she ever get there? Then suddenly she lifted her head slightly, brushing back her hair with one arm; the faint starlight gleamed on a short steel barrel. The Sergeant expelled his breath swiftly, wetting his dry lips.

"Are you hurt?" he questioned anxiously. "Lord, but you gave me a scare!"

She seemed to hear his voice, yet scarcely to understand, like one aroused suddenly from sleep.

"What! you spoke — then — then — there are others? I — I am not here all alone?"

"Not if you count me," he said, a trace of recklessness in the answer. "I have n't even a scratch so far as I know. Did they touch you?"

"No; that is, I am not quite sure; it — it was all so horrible I cannot remember. Who are you? Are you the — the soldier?"

"Yes — I 'm Hamlin. Would you mind telling me how you ever got over there?"

She straightened up, seemed to notice the heavy revolver in her fingers, and let it fall to the floor.

"Oh, it is like a dream — an awful dream. I could n't help myself. When the Mexican rolled off on to the floor, I knew he was dead, and — and there was his revolver held right out to me in his hand. Before I realized I had it, and was up here — I — I killed one — he — he fell in the wheel; I — I can never forget that!"

"Don't try," broke in Hamlin earnestly. "You 're all right," he added, admiration in his voice. "And so it was you there with the small gun. I heard

it bark, but never knew Gonzales was hit. When did it happen?"

"When — when they fired first. It — it was all smoke out there when I got to the window; they — they looked like — like wild beasts, and it did n't seem to me I was myself at all."

The man laughed lightly.

"You did the right thing, that 's all," he consoled, anxious to control her excitement. "Now you and I must decide what to do next — we are all alone."

"Alone! Has Mr. Moylan been hit also?"

"Yes," he answered, feeling it was better to tell her frankly. "He was shot, and is beyond our help. But come," and he reached over and took her hand, "you must not give up now."

She offered no resistance, but sat motionless, her face turned away. Yet she knew she trembled from head to foot, the reaction mastering her. A red tongue of flame seemed to slit the outside blackness; there was a single sharp report, echoing back from the bluff, but no sound of the striking bullet. Just an instant he caught a glimpse of her face, as she drew back, startled.

"Oh, they are coming again! What shall we do?"

"No," he insisted, still retaining her hand, confident in his judgment. "Those fellows will not attempt to rush us again to-night. You must keep cool, for we shall need all our wits to get away. An Indian never risks a night assault, unless it is a surprise. He wants to see what he is up against. Those bucks have got all they want of this outfit; they have no reason to suppose any of us were hit. They are as much afraid as we are, but when it gets daylight, and they can see the shape we 're in, then they 'll come yelling."

"But they can lie out there in the dark and shoot," she protested. "That shot was aimed at us, was n't it?"

"I reckon it was, but it never got here. Don't let that worry you; if an Indian ever hits anything with a gun it 's going to be by pure accident." He stared out of the window. "They 're liable to bang away occasionally, and I suppose it is up to us to make some response just to tell them we 're awake and ready. But they ain't firing expecting to do damage — only to attract attention while they haul off their dead. There 's a red snake yonder now creeping along in the grass — see!"

"No," hysterically, "it is just black to me."

"You have n't got the plainsman's eyes yet. Watch, now; I 'm going to stir the fellow up."

He leaned forward, the stock of the Henry held to his shoulder, and she clutched the window-casing. An instant the muzzle of the rifle wavered slightly, then steadied into position.

"Have to guess the distance," he muttered in explanation, and pulled the trigger.

There was a lightning flash, a sharp ringing report, a yell in the distance, followed by the sound of scrambling. Hamlin laughed, as he lowered his gun.

"Made him hump, anyway," he commented cheerfully. "Now what comes next?"

"I — I do not know," she answered, as though the question had been asked her, "do you?"

Somehow she was not as frightened as she had been. The calm steady coolness of the man was having its natural effect, was helping to control her own nerves. She felt his strength, his confidence, and was beginning to lean upon him — he seemed to know exactly what he was about.

"Well, no, honestly I don't; not yet," he returned, hesitating slightly. "There is no use denying we are in a mighty bad hole. If Moylan had n't got shot

we might have held out till help arrived; I 've got about twenty cartridges left; but you and I alone never could do it. I 've got to think it out, I reckon; this has been a blind fight so far; nothing to it but blazing away as fast as I could pull trigger. Now, maybe, I can use my brains a bit."

She could not see him, but some instinct led her to put out her hand and touch the rough sleeve of his shirt. It made her sure of his presence, his protection. The man felt the movement, and understood its meaning, his heart throbbing strangely.

"You are going to trust me?"

"Of — of course; how could you doubt that?"

"Well," still half questioning, "you see I 'm only an enlisted man, and sometimes officers' ladies think we are mostly pretty poor stuff, just food for powder."

She tightened her grip on his sleeve, drawing a quick breath of surprise.

"Oh, but I am not like that; truly I am not. I — I saw your face this afternoon, and — and I liked you then. I will do whatever you say."

"Thank you," he said simply. "To know that makes everything so much easier for me. We shall have to work together from now on. You keep sharp watch at the window there, while I think a bit —

there 's ordinarily a chance somewhere, you know, if one is only bright enough to uncover it."

How still the night was, and dark; although the sky was cloudless, the stars shone clearly away up in the black vault. Not even the howl of a distant coyote broke the silence. To the left, seemingly a full half-mile distant, was the red flicker of a fire, barely visible behind a projection of bank. But in front not even the keen eyes of the Sergeant could distinguish any sign of movement. Apparently the Indians had abandoned their attempt to recover the bodies of their dead.

CHAPTER VII

PLANS FOR ESCAPE

DESPERATE as he certainly felt their situation to be, for a moment or two Hamlin was unable to cast aside the influence of the girl, or concentrate his thoughts on some plan for escape. It may have been the gentle pressure of her hand upon his sleeve, but her voice continued to ring in his ears. He had never been a woman's man, nor was he specially interested in this woman beside him. He had seen her fairly, with his first appreciative glance, when he had climbed into the stage on the preceding day. He had realized there fully the charm of her face, the dark roguish eyes, the clear skin, the wealth of dark hair. Yet all this was impersonal; however pretty she might be, the fact was nothing to him and never could be. Knowing who she was, he comprehended instantly the social gulf stretching unbridged between them. An educated man himself, with family connections he had long ago ceased to discuss, he realized his present position more keenly than he otherwise might. He had

enlisted in the army with no misunderstanding as to what a private's uniform meant. He had never heretofore supposed he regretted any loss in this respect, his nature apparently satisfied with the excitement of active frontier service, yet he vaguely knew there had been times when he longed for companionship with women of the class to which he had once belonged. Fortunately his border stations offered little temptation in this respect, and he had grown to believe that he had actually forgotten. That afternoon even — sweetly fair as Miss McDonald undoubtedly appeared — he had looked upon her without the throb of a pulse, as he might upon a picture. She was not for him even to admire — she was Major McDonald's daughter, whom he had been sent to guard. That was all then.

Yet he knew that somehow it was different now — the personal element had entered unwelcomed, into the equation. Sitting there in the dark, Gonzales' body crumpled on the floor at his feet, and Moylan lying stiff and cold along the back seat, with this girl grasping his sleeve in trust, she remained no longer merely the Major's daughter — she had become *herself.* And she did not seem to care and did not seem to realize that there were barriers of rank, which under

other circumstances must so utterly separate them. She liked him, and frankly told him so, not as she would dismiss an inferior with kindness, but as though he was an equal, as though he was a gentleman. Somehow the very tone of her voice, the clinging touch of her hand, sent the blood pumping through his veins. Something besides duty inspired him; he was no longer merely a soldier, but had suddenly become transformed into a man. Years of repression, of iron discipline, were blotted out, and he became even as his birthright made him. "Molly McDonald," "Molly McDonald," he whispered the name unconsciously to himself. Then his eyes caught the distant flicker of Indian fire, and his teeth locked savagely.

There was something else to do besides dream. Because the girl had spoken pleasantly was no reason why he should act the fool. Angry at himself, he gripped his faculties, and faced the situation, aroused, intent. He must save himself — and *her!* But how? What plan promised any possibility of success? He had their surroundings in a map before his eyes. His training had taught him to note and remember what others would as naturally neglect. He was a soldier of experience, a plainsman by long training, and even in the fierceness of the Indians' attack on the stage his

quick glance had completely visualized their surroundings. He had not appreciated this at the time, but now the topography of the immediate region was unrolled before him in detail; yard by yard it reappeared as though photographed. He saw the widely rutted trail, rounding the bluff at the right a hundred yards away, curving sharply down the slope and then disappearing over the low hill to the left, a slight stream trickling along its base. Below, the short buffalo-grass, sunburned and brittle, ran to the sandy edge of the river, which flowed silently in a broad, shallow, yellow flood beneath the star gleam. Under the protection of that bank, but somewhat to the left, where a handful of stunted cottonwood trees had found precarious foothold in the sand, gleamed the solitary Indian fire. About its embers, no doubt, squatted the chiefs and older warriors, feasting and taking council, while the younger bucks lay, rifles in hand, along the night-enshrouded slope, their cruel, vengeful eyes seeking to distinguish the outlines of the coach against the black curtain of the bluff.

This had proven thus far their salvation — that steep uplift of earth against which the stage had crashed in its mad dash — for its precipitant front had compelled the savages to attack from one direction

only, a slight overhang, not unlike a roof, making it impossible even to shoot down from above. But this same sharp incline was now likewise a preventive of escape. Hamlin shook his head as he recalled to mind its steep ascent, without root or shrub to cling to. No, it would never do to attempt that; not with her. Perhaps alone he might scramble up somehow, but with her the feat would be impossible. He dismissed this as hopeless, his memory of their surroundings drifting from point to point aimlessly. He saw the whole barren vista as it last stood revealed under the glow of the sun — the desolate plateau above, stretching away into the dim north, the brown level of the plains, broken only by sharp fissures in the surface, treeless, extending for unnumbered leagues. To east and west the valley, now scarcely more green than those upper plains, bounded by its verdureless bluffs, ran crookedly, following the river course, its only sign of white dominion the rutted trail. Beyond the stream there extended miles of white sand-dunes, fantastically shapen by the wind, gradually changing into barren plains of alkali. Between crouched the vigilant Indian sentinels, alert and revengeful.

Certain facts were clear — to remain meant death, torture for him if they were taken alive, and worse

than death for her. Perspiration burst out upon his face at the thought. No! Great God! not that; he would kill her himself first. Yet this was the truth, the truth to be faced. The nearest available troops were at Dodge, a company of infantry. If they started at once they could never arrive in time to prevent an attack at daybreak. The Indians undoubtedly knew this, realized the utter helplessness of their victims, and were acting accordingly. Otherwise they would never have lighted that fire nor remained on guard. Moreover if the two of them should succeed in stealing forth from the shelter of the coach, should skulk unseen amid the dense blackness of the overhanging bluff, eluding the watchers, what would it profit in the end? Their trail would be clear; with the first gray of dawn those savage trackers would be at work, and they would be trapped in the open, on foot, utterly helpless even to fight.

The man's hands clenched and unclenched about his rifle-barrel in an agony of indecision, his eyes perceiving the silhouette of the girl against the lighter arc of sky. No, not that — not that! They must hide their trail, leave behind no faintest trace of passage for these hounds to follow. Yet how could the miracle be accomplished? Out from the mists of tortured memory

came, as a faint hope, a dim recollection of that narrow gully cutting straight down across the trail, over which the runaway had crashed in full gallop. That surely could not be far back, and was of sufficient depth to hide them in the darkness. He was uncertain how far it extended, but at some time it had been a watercourse and must have reached the river. And the river would hide their trail! A new hope sprang into his eyes. He felt the sudden straightening up of his body.

"What — what is it?" she questioned, startled. "Do you see anything? Are they coming?"

"No, no," almost impatiently. "It is still as death out there, but I almost believe I have discovered a means of escape. Do you remember a gully we ran over while I was on top of the stage?"

"I am not sure; was it when that awful jolt came?"

"Yes, it flung me to the foot-board just when I had untangled the lines. We could not have travelled a dozen yards farther before we struck this bluff — could we?"

"I hardly think so," yet evidently bewildered by his rapid questioning. "Only I was so confused and frightened I can scarcely remember. Why are you so anxious to know?"

"Because," he returned earnestly, bending toward her, "I believe that gash in the earth is going to get us out of here. Anyhow it is the only chance I can figure. If we can creep through to the river, undiscovered, I 'll agree to leave Mister Indian guessing as to where we 've gone."

The new note of animation in the man's voice aroused her, but she grasped his arm tighter.

"But — but, oh, can we? Won't they be hiding there too?"

"It 's a chance, that 's all — but better than waiting here for a certainty. See here, Miss McDonald," and he caught her hand in his own, forgetful of all save his own purpose and the necessity of strengthening her to play out the game, "the trend of that gulf is to the west; except up here close to the bluff it runs too far away for a guard line. The Indians will be lying out here on the open prairie; they will creep as close in as they dare under cover of darkness. I 'll bet there are twenty red snakes now within a hundred feet of us — oh, don't shiver and lose your nerve! They 'll not try to close that gap yet; it 's too dangerous with us on guard and only one side of the coach exposed. That fellow was trying us out a while ago, and they 've kept quiet ever since I let drive at him. They know

the limits of the safety zone, and will keep there until just before daylight. That is when they 'll try to creep up upon us. Have you got the time?"

She opened her watch, feeling for the hands with her fingers, wondering vaguely at her own calmness. The cool resourcefulness of Hamlin was like a tonic.

"It — it is a little after one o'clock," she said slowly, "although I am not sure my watch is exactly right."

"Near enough; there are signs of daylight at four — three hours left; that ought to be sufficient, but with no darkness to spare. Will you go with me? Will you do exactly as I say?"

She drew a swift breath, holding her hand to her side.

"Oh, yes," her voice catching, "what — what else can I do? I cannot stay here with those dead men!"

"But I want you to go because — well, because you trust me," he urged, a new trace of tenderness in his lowered voice. "Because you know I would give my life to defend you."

He was not sure, but he thought her face was suddenly uplifted, her eyes seeking to see him in the darkness.

"I do," she answered gravely, "you must believe

I do; but I have never been in such peril before, in such a situation of horror, and I am all unnerved. There does n't seem to be anything left me but — to trust you."

"That is good; all I can ask. I know you are all right, but I want you to keep your nerve. We are going to take a big chance; we 've got to do it — a single misplay, a slip of the foot, an incautious breath may cost our lives."

"Are you going to try to get away? To elude the Indians?"

"Yes, and there is but one possibility of success — to creep the length of the gully there, and so reach the river. Here is Gonzales' belt. Don't be afraid of it; it is not dead men who are going to hurt us. Swing the strap over your shoulder this way, and slip the revolver into the holster. That 's right; we 'll carry as little as we can, and leave our hands free." He hesitated, staring about in the darkness, swiftly deciding what to take. "Do you happen to know if either of the passengers carried any grub?"

"Grub?"

"Plains' term for food," impatiently, "rations; something for lunch *en route.*"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Moylan did; said he never took

chances on having to go hungry. It was in a flat leather pouch."

"Haversack. I have it. That will be enough to carry, with the canteen. Now there is only one thing more before we leave. We must impress those fellows with the notion that we are wide-awake, and on guard yet. See any movement out there?"

"I — I am not sure," she answered doubtfully. "There is a black smudge beyond that dead pony; lean forward here and you can see what I mean — on the ground. I — I imagined it moved just then." She pointed into the darkness. "It is the merest shadow, but seemed to wiggle along, and then stop; it 's still now."

Hamlin focussed his keen eyes on the spot indicated, shading them with one hand.

"Slide back further on the seat," he whispered softly, "and let me in next the window."

There was a moment's silence, the only sound the wind. The girl gripped the back of the seat nervously with both hands, holding her breath; the Sergeant, the outline of his face silhouetted against the sky, stared motionless into the night without. Suddenly, not making a sound, he lifted the rifle to his shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII

A WAY TO THE RIVER

SHE waited in agony as he sighted carefully, striving to gauge the distance. It seemed an interminable time before his finger pressed the trigger. Then came the report, a flash of flame, and the powder smoke blown back in her face. Half-blinded by the discharge, she yet saw that black smudge leap upright; again the Henry blazed, and the dim figure went down. There was a cry — a mad yell of rage — in which scattered voices joined; spits of fire cleaving the darkness, the barking of guns of different calibre. A bit of flying lead tore through the leather back of the coach with an odd rip; another struck the casing of the door, sending the wooden splinters flying like arrows. Hawk-eyed, Hamlin fired twice more, aiming at the sparks, grimly certain that a responding howl from the left evidenced a hit. Then, as quickly, all was still, intensely black once more. The Sergeant drew back from the window, leaning his gun against the casing.

"That will hold them for a while," he said cheerfully. "Two less out there, I reckon, and the others won't get careless again right away. Now is our time; are you ready?"

There was no response, the stillness so profound he could hear the faint ticking of the girl's watch. He reached out, almost alarmed, and touched her dress.

"What is the trouble?" he questioned anxiously. "Did n't you hear me speak?"

He waited breathless, but there was no movement, no sound, and his hand, trembling, in spite of his iron nerve, groped its way upward. She was lying back against the opposite window, her head bent sideways.

"My God," he thought, "did those devils get her?"

He lifted her slight figure up on one arm, all else blotted out, all other memory vanished through this instant dread. His cheek stung where flying splinters had struck him, but that was nothing. She was warm, her flesh was warm; then his searching fingers felt the moist blood trickling down from the edge of her hair. He let out his breath slowly, the sudden relief almost choking him. It was bad enough surely, but not what he had first feared, not death. She had been struck hard — a flying splinter of wood, perhaps, or a deflected bullet — her hair matted with blood, yet it

was no more than a flesh wound, although leaving her unconscious. If he hesitated it was but for an instant. The entire situation recurred to him in a flash; he must change his plans, but dare waste no time. If they were to escape it must be accomplished now, shadowed by darkness, while those savage watchers were safely beyond sound. His lean jaws set with fierce determination, and he grimly hitched his belt forward, one sinewy hand fingering the revolver. He would have to trust to that weapon entirely for defense; he could not carry both the rifle and the girl.

Moving slowly, cautiously, fearful lest some creaking of the old stage might betray his motions to those keen ears below, he backed through the open door. Once feeling the ground firm beneath his feet, and making sure that both canteen and haversack were secure, he reached back into the darkness, grasping the form of the unconscious girl. He stood erect with her held securely in his arms, strands of hair blowing against his cheek, listening intently, striving with keen eyes to penetrate the black curtain. The wind was fortunate, blowing steadily across the flat from the river, and they were surely invisible against the background of the overhanging bluff. He did not even feel it necessary to crouch low to avoid discovery.

He knew that peril would confront them later, when they ventured out into the open. How light she seemed, as though he clasped a child. Bearing her was going to be easier than he had supposed; the excitement yielded him a new measure of strength, yet he went forward very slowly, feeling along, inch by inch, planting his feet with exceeding care. The earth was hard-packed and would leave little trail; there were no leaves, no dead grass to rustle. Beyond the protection afforded by the stage he felt the full sweep of the wind and permitted her head to rest lower on one arm so that he could look about more clearly. She had not even moaned, although he had felt her breath upon his face. Once he stumbled slightly over some fallen earth, and farther along a foot slipped on a treacherous stone, but the slight noise died unnoticed in the night. It was farther to the gully than he had supposed; his heart was in his throat fearing he had missed it, half-believing the depression failed to extend to the base of the bluff. Then his foot, exploring blindly, touched the edge of the bank. Carefully he laid his burden down, placing his battered campaign hat beneath her head. He bent over her again, assuring himself that she breathed regularly, and then crept down alone into the shallow ravine.

His nerves were like steel now, his hand steady, his heart beating without an accelerated throb. He knew the work, and rejoiced in it. This was why he was a soldier. Silently, swiftly, he unbuckled his belt, refastening it across the straps so as to hold canteen and haversack noiseless, and then, revolver in hand, began creeping down under cover of the low banks. He must explore the path first before attempting to bear her along in his arms; must be sure the passage was unguarded. After it swerved to the right there would be little danger, but while it ran straight, some cautious savage might have chosen it to skulk in. To deal with such he needed to be alone, and free.

He must have crawled thus for thirty yards, hands and knees aching horribly, his eyes ever peering over the edge of the bank, his ears tingling to the slightest noise. The tiny glow of the fire far away to the left was alone visible in the intense blackness; the wind brought to him no sound of movement. The stillness was profound, almost uncanny; as he paused and listened he could distinguish the throb of his heart. He was across the trail at last, for he had felt and traced the ruts of wheels, and where the banks had been worked down almost to a level with the prairie. He crossed this opening like a snake, and then arose to his knees

beyond, where the gully deepened. He remained poised, motionless, scarcely daring to breathe. Surely that was something else — that shapeless blotch of shadow, barely topping the line of bank! Was it ten feet away? Or five? He could not tell. He stared; there was no movement, and yet his eyes began to discern dimly the outlines — the head and shoulders of a man! The Sergeant crept forward — an inch, two inches, a foot. The figure did not stir. Now he was sure the fellow's head was lying flat on the turf, oddly distorted by a feathered war bonnet. The strange posture, the utter lack of movement, seemed proof that the tired warrior had fallen asleep on watch. Like a cat Hamlin crept up slowly toward him, poised for a spring.

Some sense of the wild must have stirred the savage into semi-consciousness. Suddenly he sat up, gripping the gun in his hands. Yet even as his opening eyes saw dimly the Sergeant's menacing shadow, before he could scream his alarm, or spring upright, the revolver butt struck with dull thud, and he went tumbling backward into the ditch, his cry of alarm ending in a hoarse croak. From somewhere, out of the dense darkness in front a voice called, sharp and guttural, as if its owner had been startled by the mysterious

sound of the blow. It was the language of the Arapahoes, and out of his vague memory of the tongue, spurred to recollection by the swift emergency, Hamlin growled a hoarse answer, hanging breathlessly above the motionless body until the "ugh!" of the fellow's response proved him without suspicion. He waited, counting the seconds, every muscle strained with expectancy, listening. He had a feeling that some one was crawling over the short grass, wiggling along like a snake, but the faint sound, if sound it was, grew less distinct. Finally he lifted his head above the edge of the bank, but saw nothing, not even a dim shadow.

"They are closing in, I reckon," he thought soberly, "and it is n't likely there will be any more of these gentry as far back as this; looks as though this gully turned west just beyond. Anyhow I 've got to risk it."

He returned more rapidly, knowing the passage, yet with no less caution, finding the unconscious girl lying exactly as he had left her. As he clasped her form in his arms, her lips uttered some incoherent words, but otherwise she gave no sign of life.

"Yes, yes," he whispered close to her ear, hoping thus to hold her silent. "It is all right now; only keep still."

He could feel her breathing, and realized the danger of her return to consciousness. If she should be frightened and cry out, their fate would be sealed. Yet he must accept the chance, now that he knew the way to be clear. He held her tightly in both arms, his revolver thrust back into its holster. Bending as low as he could with his burden, feeling carefully through the darkness before advancing a foot, he moved steadily forward. Where the gully deepened their heads were at the edge of the bank, but much of the way was exposed, except for the dark shadows of the slope. Fortunately there were clouds to the west, already obscuring that half of the sky, but to the east nothing was visible against the faint luminousness of the sky-line. Once, far over there to the left, a gun was fired, the flame splitting the night asunder, and against the distant reflection a black figure rose up between, only to be instantly snuffed out again. Hamlin put down his uplifted foot, and waited, in tense, motionless silence, but nothing happened, except the echo of a far-away voice.

A dozen feet farther, some four-footed animal suddenly leaped to the edge of the bank, sniffed, and disappeared noiselessly. So taut were his nerves strung that the Sergeant sank upon his knees, releasing one

hand to grip his revolver, before he realized the cause of alarm — some prowling prairie wolf. Then, with teeth grimly locked, bending lower and lower, he crept across the rutted trail, and past the dead body of the Indian. Not until then did he dare to breathe naturally or to stand upright; but now, the gully, bending to the right, led away from danger, every step gained adding to their safety. He was confident now, full of his old audacity, yet awake to every trick of plainscraft. The girl's head rested against his shoulder, and he bent his cheek to hers, feeling its warmth. The touch of his unshaven beard pricked her into semi-consciousness, and she spoke so loud that it gave him a thrill of apprehension. He dared not run in the darkness for fear of stumbling, yet moved with greater swiftness, until the depression ended at the river. Here, under the protection of the bank, Hamlin put down his burden and stood erect, stretching his strained muscles and staring back into the dark.

What now? Which way should they turn? He had accomplished all he had planned for himself back there in the coach, but now he became aware of other problems awaiting solution. In less than an hour it would be daylight; he almost imagined it was lighter already over yonder in the east. With the first dawn

those watchful Indians, creeping cautiously closer, would discover the stage deserted, and would be on their trail. And they had left a trail easily followed. Perhaps the hard, dry ground might confuse those savage trackers, but they would scour the open country between bluff and river, and find the dead warrior in the gully. That would tell the story. To go west, along the edge of the river, wading in the water, would be useless precaution; such a trick would be suspected at once, and there was no possibility of rescue from that direction. They might as well walk open-eyed into a trap. There was but one hope, one opportunity — to cross the stream before dawn came and hide among those shifting sand-dunes of the opposite shore. Hamlin thoroughly understood the risk involved, the treacherous nature of the Arkansas, the possibility that both might be sucked down by engulfing quicksand, yet even such a lonely death was preferable to Indian torture.

The girl at his feet stirred and moaned. In another moment he had filled his hat with water from the river, had lifted her head upon one arm, and using the handkerchief from about his throat, was washing away the blood that matted her hair. Now that his fingers

felt the wound, he realized the force of the blow stunning her, although its outward manifestation was slight. Her figure trembled in his arms and her eyes opened, gazing up wonderingly at the black outlines of his shadow. Then she made an effort as though to draw away.

"Lie still a while yet, Miss McDonald," he said soothingly, "until you regain your strength."

He heard the quick gasp of her breath, and felt the sudden relaxing of her muscles.

"You!" she exclaimed in undisguised relief at recognition of the voice; "is it really you? Where are we? What has happened?"

He told her rapidly, his face bent close, realizing that she was clinging to him again as she had once before back in the stage. As he ended, she lifted one hand to her wound.

"And I am not really hurt — not seriously?" her voice bewildered. "I — I never realized I had been struck. And — and you carried me all that way —" she shuddered, looking about into the black silence. "I — I can hardly comprehend — yet. Please explain again; they are back there watching for us still, believing we are in the coach; they will follow our trail

as soon as it becomes daylight. Why — why, the sky is brighter over in the east already, is n't it? What was it you said we must do?"

"Get across the river; once hidden in those sand-dunes over there we 'll be safe enough."

"Across the river," she repeated the words dully, sitting up to stare out toward the water. Then her head sank into her hands. "Can we — can we ever do that?"

Hamlin bent forward on his knees, striving with keen eyes, sharpened by his night's experience, to learn more of what lay before them. The movement, slight as it was, served to frighten her, and she grasped him by the sleeve.

"Do not leave me; do not go away," she implored swiftly. "Whatever you say is best, I will do."

CHAPTER IX

ACROSS THE RIVER

HE dropped his hand upon hers, clasping the clinging fingers tightly.

"Yes, we can make it," he answered confidently. "Wait until I make sure what is out there."

He had slight recollection of the stream at this point, although he had crossed it often enough at the known fords, both above and below. Yet these crossings had always been accomplished with a horse under him, and a knowledge of where the trail ran. But he knew the stream, its peculiarities and dangers. It was not the volume of water, nor its depth he feared, for wide as it appeared stretching from bank to bank, he realized its shallow sluggishness. The peril lay in quicksand, or the plunging into some unseen hole, where the sudden swirl of water might pull them under. Alone he would have risked it recklessly, but with her added weight in his arms, he realized how a single false step would be fatal. The farther shore was invisible; he could perceive nothing but the slight gleam

of water lapping the sand at his feet, as it flowed slowly, noiselessly past, and beyond, the dim outline of a narrow sand ridge. Even this, however, was encouragement, proving the shallowness of the stream. He turned about, his face so close he could see her eyes.

"We shall have to try it, Miss McDonald; you must permit me to carry you."

"Yes."

"And whatever happens do not scream — just cling tight to me."

"Yes," a little catching in her throat. "Tell me first, please, just what it is you fear."

"Quicksand principally; it is in all these western rivers, and the two of us together on one pair of feet will make it harder to pull out of the suck. If I tell you to get down, do so quickly."

"Yes."

"Then there may be holes out there in the bottom. I don't mind those so much, although these cavalry boots are no help in swimming."

"I can swim."

"Hardly in your clothes; but I am glad to know it, nevertheless. You could keep afloat at least, and the holes are never very large. Are you ready now?"

She gave him her hands and stood up. The Sergeant drew in a long breath and transferred the haversack to her shoulder.

"We 'll try and keep that from getting soaked, if we can," he explained. "There is no hotel over in those sand-hills. Now hold on tight."

He swung her easily to his broad shoulder, clasping her slender figure closely with one arm.

"That 's it! Now get a firm grip. I 'll carry you all right."

To the girl, that passage was never more than a dim memory. Still partially dazed from the severe blow on her head, she closed her eyes as Hamlin stepped cautiously down into the stream and clung to him desperately, expecting each moment to be flung forward into the water. But the Sergeant's mind was upon his work, and every detail of the struggle left its impress on his memory. He saw the dark sweep of the water, barely visible in the gleam of those few stars unobscured by cloud, and felt the sluggish flow against his legs as he moved. The bottom was soft, yet his feet did not sink deeply, although it was rather difficult wading. However, the clay gave him more confidence than sand underfoot, and there was less depth of water even than he had anticipated. He was

wet only to the thighs when he toiled up on to the low spit of sand, and put the girl down a moment to catch a fresh breath and examine the broader stretch of water ahead. They could see both shores now, that which they had just left, a black, lumping, dim outline. Except for the lapping of the water at their feet, all was deathly still. Even the Indian fire had died out, and it was hard to conceive that savages were hidden behind that black veil, and that they two were actually fleeing for their lives. To the girl it was like some dreadful delirium of sleep, but the man felt the full struggle. There was a star well down in the south he chose to guide by, but beyond that he must trust to good fortune. Without a word he lifted her again to his shoulder, and pushed on.

The water ran deeper, shelving off rapidly, until it rose well above his waist, and with sufficient current so that he was compelled to lean against it to maintain balance, scarcely venturing forward a foot at a time. Once he stumbled over some obstruction, barely averting a fall; he felt the swift clutch of her fingers at his throat, the quick adjustment of her body, but her lips gave no utterance of alarm. His groping feet touched the edge of a hole, and he turned, facing the current, tracing his way carefully until he found a

passage on solid bottom. A bit of driftwood swirled down out of the night; a water-soaked limb, striking against him before it was even seen, bruised one arm, and then dodged past like a wild thing, leaving a glitter of foam behind. The sand-dunes grew darker, more distinct, the water began to grow shallow, the bottom changing from mud to sand. He slipped and staggered in the uncertain footing, his breath coming in quicker gasps, yet with no cessation of effort. Once he felt the dreaded suck about his ankles, and broke into a reckless run, splashing straight forward, falling at the water's edge, yet not before the girl was resting safely on the soft sand.

Strong as Hamlin was, his muscles trained by strenuous out-door life, he lay there for a moment utterly helpless, more exhausted from the nervous strain indeed, than the physical exertion. He had realized fully the desperate nature of that passage, expecting every step to be engulfed, and the reaction, the knowledge that they had actually attained the shore safely, left him weak as a child, hardly able to comprehend the fact. The girl was upon her feet first, alarmed and solicitous, bending down to touch him with her hand.

"Sergeant, you are not hurt?" she questioned. "Tell me you are not hurt?"

"Oh, no," dragging himself up the bank, yet panting as he endeavored to speak cheerfully. "Only that was a rather hard pull, the last of it, and I am short of breath. I shall be all right in a moment."

There was a sand-dune just beyond, and he seated himself and leaned against it.

"I am beginning to breathe easier already," he explained. "Sit down here, Miss McDonald. We are safe enough now in this darkness."

"You are all wet, soaking wet."

"That is nothing; the sand is warm yet from yesterday's sun, and my clothes will dry fast enough. It is beginning to grow light in the east."

The faces of both turned in that direction where appeared the first twilight approach of dawn. Already were visible the dark lines of the opposite shore, across the gleam of water, and beyond appeared the dim outlines of the higher bluffs. The slope between river and hill, however, remained in impenetrable darkness. The minds of both fugitives reverted to the same scene — the wrecked stage with its dead passengers within, its savage watchers without. She lifted her head, and the soft light reflected on her face.

"I — I thank God we are not over there now," she said falteringly.

"Yes," he admitted. "They will be creeping in closer; they will not wait much longer. Hard as I have worked, I can't realize yet that we are out of those toils."

"You did not expect to succeed?"

"No; frankly I did not; all I could do was hope — take the one chance left. The slightest accident meant betrayal. I am ashamed of being so weak just now, but it was the strain. You see," he explained carefully, "I 've been scouting through hostile Indian country mostly day and night for nearly a week, and then this thing happened. No matter how iron a man is his nerve goes back on him after a while."

"I know."

"It was n't myself," he went on doggedly, "but it was the knowledge of having to take care of you. That was what made me worry; that, and knowing a single misstep, the slightest noise, would bring those devils on us, where I could n't fight, where there was just one thing I could do."

There was silence, her hands pressed to her face, her eyes fixed on him. Then she questioned him soberly.

"You mean, kill me?"

"Sure," he answered simply, without looking

around; "I would have had to do it — just as though you were a sister of mine."

Her hands reached out and clasped his, and he glanced aside at her face, seeing it clearly.

"I — I thought you would," she said, her voice trembling. "I — I was going to ask you once before I was hurt, but — but I could n't, and somehow I trusted you from the first, when you got in." She hesitated, and then asked, "How did you know I was Molly McDonald? You never asked."

The Sergeant's eyes smiled, turning away from her face to stare out again across the river.

"Because I had seen your picture."

"My picture? But you told us you were from Fort Union?"

"Yes; that is my station, only I had been sent to the cantonment on the Cimarron with despatches. Your father was in command there, and worried half to death about you. He could not leave the post, and the only officer remaining there with him was a disabled cavalry captain. Every man he could trust was out on scouting service. He took a chance on me. Maybe he liked my looks, I don't know; more probably, he judged I would n't be a sergeant and entrusted with those despatches I 'd just brought in, if I was n't

considered trustworthy. Anyhow I had barely fallen asleep when the orderly called me, and that was what was wanted — that I ride north and head you off."

"But you were not obliged to go?"

"No; I was not under your father's orders. I doubt if I would have consented if I had n't been shown your picture. I could n't very well refuse then."

She sat with hands clasped together, her eyes shadowed by long lashes.

"I should have thought there would have been some soldiers there — his own men."

"There were," dryly, "but the army just now is recruited out of pretty tough material. To be in the ranks is almost a confession of good-for-nothingness. You are an officer's daughter and understand this to be true."

"Yes," she answered doubtfully. "I have been brought up thinking so; only, of course, there are exceptions."

"No doubt, and I hope I am already counted one."

"You know you are. My father trusted you, and so do I."

"I have wondered some times," he said musingly, watching her face barely visible in the dawn, "whether

those of your class actually considered us as being really human, as anything more valuable than mere food for powder. I came into the regular army at the close of the war from the volunteer service. I was accustomed to discipline and all that, and knew my place. But I never suspected then that a private soldier was considered a dog. Yet that was the first lesson I was compelled to learn. It has been pretty hard sometimes to hold in, for there was a time when I had some social standing and could resent an insult."

She was looking straight at him, surprised at the bitterness in his voice.

"They carry it altogether too far," she said. "I have often thought that — mostly the young officers, the West Pointers — and yet you know that the majority of enlisted men are — well, dragged from the slums. My father says it has been impossible to recruit a good class since the war closed, that the right kind had all the army they wanted."

"Which is true enough, but there are good men nevertheless, and every commander knows it. A little considerate treatment would make them better still."

She shook her head questioningly.

"I do not know," she admitted. "I suppose there

are two viewpoints. You were in the volunteers, you said. Why did you enlist in the regulars?"

"Largely because I liked soldiering, or thought I did. I knew there would be plenty of fighting out here, and, I believed, advancement."

"You mean to a commission?"

"Yes. You see, I did not understand then the impossibility, the great gulf fixed. I dreamed that good fortune might give me something to do worth while."

"And fate has been unkind?"

"In a way, yes," and he laughed rather grimly. "I had my chance — twice; honorable mention, and all that, but that ended it. There is no bridge across the chasm. An enlisted man is not held fit for any higher position; if that was not sufficient to bar me, the fact that I had fought for the South would."

"You were in the Confederate army? You must have been very young."

"Oh, no; little more than a boy, of course, but so were the majority of my comrades. I was in my senior college year when the war broke out. But, Miss McDonald, this will never do! See how light it is growing. There, they have begun firing already. We must get back out of sight behind the sand-dunes."

CHAPTER X

THE RIPENING OF ACQUAINTANCE

THEY needed to retire but a few steps to be entirely concealed, yet so situated as to command a view across the muddy stream. The sun had not risen above the horizon, but the gray dawn gave misty revealment of the sluggish-flowing river, the brown slope opposite, and the darker shadow of bluffs beyond. The popping of those distant guns had ceased by the time they attained their new position, and they could distinguish the Indians — mere black dots against the brown slope — advancing in a semicircle toward the silent stage. Evidently they were puzzled, fearful of some trickery, for occasionally a gun would crack viciously, the brown smoke plainly visible, the advancing savages halting to observe the effect. Then a bright colored blanket was waved aloft as though in signal, and the entire body, converging toward the deserted coach, leaped forward with a wild yell, which echoed faintly across the water.

The girl hid her face in the sand, with a half-stifled sob, but the Sergeant watched grimly, his eyes barely above the ridge. What would they do when they discovered the dead bodies? — when they realized that others had eluded their vigilance during the night? Would they be able to trace them, or would his ruse succeed? Of course their savage cunning would track them as far as the river — there was no way in which he could have successfully concealed the trail made down the gully, or the marks left on the sandy bank. But would they imagine he had dared to cross the broad stream, burdened with the girl, confronting almost certain death in the quicksand? Would they not believe rather that he had waded along the water's edge headed west, hoping thus to escape to the bluffs, where some hiding-place might be found? Even if they suspected a crossing, would any warriors among them be reckless enough to follow? Would they not be more apt to believe that both fugitives had been sucked down into the treacherous stream? Almost breathless Hamlin watched, these thoughts coursing through his mind, realizing the deadly trap in which they were caught, if the Indians suspected the truth and essayed the passage. Behind them was sand, ridge after ridge, as far as the eye could discern, and

every step they took in flight would leave its plain trail. And now the test was at hand.

He saw them crowd about the coach, leaping and yelling with fury; watched them jerk open the door, and drag forth the two dead bodies, dancing about them, like so many demons, brandishing their guns. A moment they were bunched thus, their wild yelling shrill with triumph; then some among them broke away, bending low as they circled in against the bluff. They knew already that there had been others in the stage, others who had escaped. They were seeking the trail. Suddenly one straightened up gesticulating, and the others rushed toward him — they had found the "sign"! They were silent now, those main trailers, two of them on hands and knees. Only back where the bodies lay some remained yelling and dancing furiously. Then they also, in response to a shout and the wave of a blanketed arm, scattered, running west toward the gully. There was no hesitancy now; some savage instinct seemed to tell them where the fugitives had gone. They dragged the dead warrior from the ditch, screaming savagely at the discovery. A dozen scrambled for the river bank, others ran for the pony herd, while one or two remained beside the dead warrior. Even at that distance Hamlin could distinguish

"No, don't move! The stage has been gutted and set on fire."

Roman Nose, and tell what were his orders by every gesture of his arm. The Sergeant grasped the girl's hand, his own eyes barely above the sand ridge, his lips whispering back.

"No, don't move; I'll tell you everything. The stage has been gutted and set on fire. Now they are coming with the ponies. Most of them are directly opposite studying the marks we left on the sand of the bank. Yes, they look across here, but the chief is sure we have gone the other way; he is waving his hand up the river now, and talking. Now he is getting on his horse; there are ten or twelve of them. One fellow is pointing across here, but no one agrees with him. Now Roman Nose is giving orders. Hear that yell! They 're off now, riding up stream, lashing their ponies into a run. All of them? No; quite a bunch are going back to the coach. I don't believe they are going to hang around here long though, for they are driving in all their ponies."

"But won't those others come back when they discover we have not gone up the river?"

"I wish I could answer that," he replied earnestly. "But it all depends on what those devils know of the whereabouts of troops. They are Northern Indians, and must have broken through the scouting details sent

out from Wallace and Dodge. Some of the boys are bound to be after them, and there is more chance for them to get back safely along the mountains than in the other direction. I don't suppose an Indian in the bunch was ever south of the Arkansas. Wait! Those fellows are going to move now; going for good, too — they are taking the dead Indians with them."

They were little more than black dots at that distance, yet the sun was up by this time and his keen vision could distinguish every movement.

"Creep up here, and you can see also," he said quietly. "They are far enough away now so that it is safe."

There was a moment of breathless quiet, the two fugitives peering cautiously over the sand ridge. To the girl it was a confusion of figures rushing back and forth about the smoking ruins of the stage; occasionally a faint yell echoed across the river, and she could distinguish a savage on his pony gesticulating as he rode back and forth. But the Sergeant comprehended the scene. His eyes met hers and read her bewilderment.

"They are going all right, and in a hurry. It's plain enough they are afraid to stay there any longer. See, they are lashing bodies on to the ponies. Ah,

that is what I wanted to be sure about — that fellow is heading west on the trail; now the others are moving."

"Then you are sure Roman Nose will not return? That — that we are safe?"

"Yes; I would n't hesitate to go back as soon as the last of them disappear over the ridge," pointing up the river. "They knew they had to go that way; Roman Nose and his band hoped we 'd taken that direction, and hurried on ahead to catch us if he could. They are afraid to stay about here any longer. Look how they are lashing those ponies; there, the last of them are leaving."

They lay there in the sand, already becoming warm under the rays of the sun, trying to assure themselves that all danger of discovery had vanished. There was no movement on the opposite shore, only the blue spiral of smoke curling up against the bluff, marking where the stage had stood. About this, outlined upon the brown grass, appeared darker patches representing dead ponies and the bodies of Moylan and Gonzales where they had been tumbled, scalped and otherwise mutilated. Down by the river a wounded pony tried to follow the disappearing cavalcade, but fell, giving vent to one scream of agony. Then all was silent,

motionless, the last straggler clubbing his horse pitilessly as he vanished over the ridge.

Hamlin sat up, his eyes smiling.

"We are the lucky ones, Miss McDonald," he said, his manner unconsciously more formal now that the danger had passed and a swift realization of who his companion was recurring to his mind. "Something must have frightened them." He shaded his eyes, staring at the bluffs opposite, "But there is nothing in sight from here. Well, the best thing we can do is to eat breakfast. May I have the haversack, and see what it is stocked with?"

"Certainly not. There is so little I can do, I do not propose yielding any prerogative." And she drew her head through the strap, letting the leather bag fall to the sand. "I am afraid there is no cloth here. Would you dare light a fire?"

"Hardly, even if we had fuel," he answered, watching her with interest. She glanced up into his face, her cheeks reddening.

"Why don't you want me to do this?"

"How do you know I object? Indeed, it is quite pleasant to be waited upon. Only, you see, it is very unusual for an officer's daughter to take such good care of an enlisted man."

"But I am not thinking of that at all. You — this is different."

"For the moment, perhaps," just a slight bitterness in his tone, "and I should enjoy it while I can."

She stopped in her work, sitting straight before him. Her eyes were indignant, yet she stifled the first words that leaped to her lips. His soft hat lay on the sand and the sun revealed his tanned face, bringing out its strength.

"You — should n't say that," she faltered. "Surely you do not believe I will ever become ungrateful."

"No; and yet gratitude is not altogether satisfactory." He hesitated. "It is hard to explain just what I mean to you, for you do not realize the life we lead out here — the loneliness of it. Even a man in the ranks may possess the desires of a human being. I — well, I 'm hungry for the companionship of a good woman. Don't misunderstand, Miss McDonald. I am not presuming, nor taking advantage of the accident which has placed us in this peculiar position, but I have been a trooper out here now a long while, stationed at little isolated frontier posts, riding the great plains, doing the little routine duties of soldiering. I have n't spoken to a decent woman on terms of social

equality for two years; I 've looked at a few from a distance and taken orders from them. But they have glanced through me as though I were something inanimate instead of a man. I saved an officer's life once down there," and he pointed into the southeast, " and his wife thanked me as though it were a disagreeable duty. I reckon you don't understand, but I don't like the word gratitude."

" But I do understand," and she stretched out her hand to him across the opened haversack. " I 'm not so dull, and it must be awful to feel alone like that. I told you I — I liked you, and — I do. Now remember that, please, and be good. From now on I am not Major McDonald's daughter, not even Miss McDonald — I 'm just Molly McDonald."

The gray eyes laughed.

" You are assuming a great risk."

" I don't believe it," her forehead wrinkling a little, but her eyes bright. " You and I can be friends — can't we? "

" We 'll try, out here, at least. Even if the dream does n't last long, it will be pleasant to remember."

" You do not think it will last, then? "

He shook his head.

"I would be a fool to hope; I have been in the army too long."

They were still for a minute, the girl's fingers toying with the flap of the haversack, her eyes gazing across the river. He thought they were misty.

"I am sorry you are so prejudiced," she said at last slowly, "for I am not like that at all. I am not going to be ashamed of a friend because he — he is in the ranks. I shall be only the more proud. What is your full name?"

He passed his hand over his hair, and laughed.

"They call me 'Brick' Hamlin — a subtle reference to this crown of glory."

"But it is n't red," she insisted swiftly. "Only it shows a little bright with the sun on it, and I am not going to call you that. I don't like nicknames. What did they call you before you went into the army? When — when you did know good women?"

The Sergeant bent his head, and then lifted his gray eyes to the girl's face.

"I had almost forgotten," he confessed, "but I 'll tell you — David Carter Hamlin; there, you have all of it — my mother called me Dave — could you, once?"

"Could I?" laughingly. "Why, of course; now, Dave, we will have breakfast."

"And I am quite ready for it — Molly."

The girl's cheeks reddened, but their eyes met, and both laughed.

CHAPTER XI

A REMEMBRANCE OF THE PAST

MOYLAN must have had Miss McDonald in mind when he had stocked up with food at Fort Dodge, and had therefore chosen all the delicacies to be found at that frontier post. These were not extensive, consisting largely of canned goods, which, nevertheless, made a brave show, and were clearly enough not the ordinary fare of the border. Hamlin had to smile at the array, but Molly handled each article almost with reverence, tears dimming her eyes in memory.

"He — he bought these for me," she said softly, and looking across reproachfully at the Sergeant. "It was the best he could do."

"I was not laughing at poor Moylan; only, I fear, he had a wrong conception of a girl's needs on the trail. But I reckon our combined appetites are equal to it."

"I do not feel as though I could swallow a mouthful."

"Under orders you will try. We have a hard day before us, young lady, and some tramping to do afoot. I wish I knew where that horse I turned loose last night has drifted to; into the bluffs, probably, where the grass is green. He would be of some help just now. Try this, Miss McDonald, for lack of something better. I yearn for ham and coffee, but hardly dare build a fire yet. The smoke would be seen for miles away."

"If we were across the river we could use the stage fire."

"Yes, but there is a wide river flowing between. Don't be afraid of that trip," noting the expression of her face. "It will be easy enough to cross back by daylight, now that I know where the danger spots are."

"I was not so terribly afraid last night; I hardly had time to realize what was being done, did you?"

"Well, yes; it was risky business. Awfully treacherous bottom and I was trusting to good luck."

The Sergeant ate heartily, speaking occasionally so as to divert her mind, but for the most part, busily thinking and endeavoring to decide his next move. He sat facing the river, continually lifting his head to scan the opposite shore. There was probably a scouting detail somewhere near at hand, either approaching

from the east, alarmed by the report of the fleeing stage crew, or else a detachment tracking Roman Nose's warriors across those plains extending into the north. The latter contingency was the more probable, judging from the Indians' flight, and his own knowledge of the small reserve force left at Dodge. Besides, ride as they might those two fleeing cowards of yesterday could hardly have yet reached that shelter of safety and might not confess the truth of their desertion even when they did arrive. A pursuing force was the only real hope for escaping the necessity of a hard tramp back over the trail. Well, the girl looked fit, and he glanced toward her appreciatively.

In spite of the sad experiences of the past night she was a pleasant spectacle, her eyes bright with excitement, her cheeks flushed under the morning sun which flecked her dark, disordered hair with odd color. Hers was a winsome face, with smiling lips, and frank good nature in its contour. He was surprised to note how fresh and well she looked.

"Are you tired?"

"Not very. It seems more as though I had dreamed all this than actually passed through the experience. Perhaps when I do realize, the reaction will set in. But now I am strong, and — and not at all frightened."

"Nor hungry?"

"It is hard to eat, but I am often that way." Her hand strayed to the emptied haversack, and she turned it carelessly over, where it lay beside her on the sand. "Why, this is an old Confederate sack, is n't it? I had n't noticed before; see, the 'C. S. A.' is on the flap."

"So it is; perhaps Moylan served in the South."

"I think not. I am sure this was never his, for he bought it at Dodge. I remember he told me he would have to find something to carry our lunch in." She pushed the flap farther back, then held it up to the sunlight. "There are some other letters, but they are hardly decipherable. I cannot read the first line at all, but the second is somewhat plainer —'Fourth Texas Infantry.'"

Hamlin reached out his hand swiftly, and grasped the haversack, forgetting everything else in suddenly aroused interest. The girl, surprised, stared up into his face, as he closely studied the faded inscription, his face expressing unconcealed amazement.

"Good God!" he ejaculated breathlessly. "It was Gene's. What can this mean?"

"You — you knew the soldier?"

"Knew him? Yes," speaking almost unconsciously,

his incredulous eyes still on the inscription, as though fearful it might vanish. "That man was either my best friend, or my worst enemy; under heaven, I know not which. Why, it is like a miracle, the finding of this bag out here in the desert. It is the clue I have been searching after for nearly five years." He seemed to pull himself together with an effort, realizing her presence. "Excuse me, Miss McDonald, but this thing knocked me silly. I hardly knew what I was saying."

"It means much to you? To your life?"

"Everything, if I can only trace it back, and thus discover the present whereabouts of the original owner."

"Was that your regiment, then — the Fourth Texas Infantry?"

He bowed his head, now looking frankly at her.

"Would you mind telling me your rank?"

"I became Captain of 'B' Company after the fight at Chancellorsville; we served in Virginia under Massa Robert, and lost every commissioned officer in that affair." He hesitated to go on, but she prompted him by a question:

"And then what? What was it that happened? Don't be afraid to tell me."

His gray eyes met hers, and then turned away, his lips pressed together.

"Nothing until the day we fought at Fisher's Hill," he said slowly. "Then I was dismissed from the service — for cowardice."

"Cowardice!" repeating the word in quick protest. "Why, how could that be? Surely your courage had been sufficiently tested before?"

"Cowardice, and disobedience of orders," he repeated dully, "after I had been under fire almost night and day for three years; after I had risen from the ranks and commanded the regiment."

"And you had no defence?"

"No; at least, none I could use; this man might have saved me, but he did not, and I never knew why."

"Who was he?"

"My senior captain, detailed on Early's staff; he brought me the orders verbally I was afterwards accused of disobeying. I was temporarily in command of the regiment that day with rank as major. There was a mistake somewhere, and we were horribly cut up, and a number taken prisoners. It was my word against his, and — and he lied."

She took the haversack from him, studying the scarcely legible inscription.

"'E. L. F.' Are those the letters?"

"Yes; they stand for Eugene Le Fevre; he was of French descent, his home in New Orleans."

"You knew him well?"

"I thought so; we were at school together and afterwards in the army."

She looked across at him again, touched by the tender echo of his voice; then leaned forward and placed one hand upon his.

"You have not spoken about this for a long while, have you?"

"No," his eyes lighting up pleasantly, "hardly thought of it, except sometimes alone at night. The memory made me savage, and all my efforts to ascertain the truth have proven useless."

"That is why you enlisted?"

"Largely; there is no better place to hide one's past than in the ranks out here on the plains. I — I could not remain at home with that disgrace hanging over me."

"You must tell me all about it."

Her head lifted suddenly as she gazed out across the river, shading her eyes. "Why, what are those?" she exclaimed eagerly, "there, moving on the bluffs opposite?"

His glance swept to the northward, and he was as instantly the soldier again. Far away on the upper plateau, clearly outlined against the blue of the distant sky, appeared a number of dark figures. For a moment he believed them buffaloes, but in another instant decided instead they were horsemen riding two by two.

"Get down lower, Miss McDonald," he commanded. "Now we can see, and not be seen. They must be cavalrymen, the way they ride, but we can take no chances."

They watched the black specks pass east to where the bluff circled in toward the river. It was from there those distant riders first observed the dim spiral of smoke still curling up from the burning stage, for they halted, bunching together, and then disappeared slowly down a gash in the side of the hill. Emerging on the lower flat they turned in the direction of the fire, spurring their horses into a swift trot. There was no longer any doubt of their being troopers, and Hamlin stood upright on the sand hummock waving his hat. They were gathered about the fire, a few dismounted beside the dead bodies, before his signal was observed. Then a field glass flashed in the sunlight, and three or four of the party rode down to the bank of the river. One of these, the glasses still held in his

hand, his horse's hoofs in the water, shouted across the stream.

"Who are you over there?"

"White people," answered Hamlin, using his hands for a trumpet. "We escaped from the stage last night. I am a sergeant, Seventh Cavalry, and the lady with me is the daughter of Major McDonald at Fort Devere."

"How did you get across?"

"Waded in the dark; there is good bottom. Send a man over with a couple of horses."

The officer turned and spoke to the others grouped beside him; then raised his voice again.

"Are you sure there is no quicksand?"

"None to hurt; come straight over the end of that sand spit, and then swerve about a dozen feet to the right to keep out of a hole. The water won't go to a horse's belly. Try it, Wasson, you ought to know me."

"You 're 'Brick' Hamlin, ain't you?"

"A good guess, Sam; come on."

Two troopers left their saddles, and the third man, the one answering the last hail, gathered the reins in one hand, and spurred his horse confidently into the brown water. Following the Sergeant's shouted

directions, the three animals plunged forward and came dripping up the low sand bank. The rider, a sallow-faced man clad in rough corduroy, patched and colorless, leaned over and held out his hand.

"Dern yer o' skin," he said solemnly, but with a twinkle in his eyes, "ye 're sure got the luck of it. Ain't seen ye afore fer two years."

"That 's right, Sam; down on the Cowskin, was n't it? Who 's over there?"

"Leftenant Gaskins, an' some o' the Fourth Cavalry, scoutin' out o' Dodge; been plum to ther mountings, an' goin' home ag'in. Whut the hell (beggin' yer pardin, mam) has happened yere?"

"I 'll explain when we get across," and Hamlin swung the haversack to his shoulder, and turned to the girl. "This is Sam Wasson, Miss McDonald, a scout I have been out with before; let me help you into the saddle."

CHAPTER XII

THE PARTING

THEY recrossed the stream carefully, the horses restless and hard to control in the current, the men riding on either side, grasping the bit of the girl's mount. Others had joined the little squad of troopers on the bank, and welcomed them with a cheer. The Lieutenant dismounted. At sight of the girl's face he whipped off his hat, and came forward.

"Miss McDonald," he said, pleasantly greeting her, "I am Lieutenant Gaskins, and I have met your father — of the Sixth Infantry, is he not? So glad to be of service, you know. You were in the stage, I understand; a most remarkable escape."

"I owe it all to Sergeant Hamlin," she replied, turning to glance toward the latter. "He bore me away unconscious in his arms. Indeed, I scarcely realized what happened. Do you know anything regarding my father?"

"Oh, yes, I can put your mind at ease so far as he

is concerned. I presume you were endeavoring to reach his post when this unfortunate affair occurred."

"Yes."

"Sheridan has ordered Devere abandoned for the present, and the Major's troops are to return to Dodge. No doubt we shall be in the field within a week or two. But we can cultivate acquaintance later; now I must straighten out this affair." He bowed again, and turned stiffly toward Hamlin, who had dismounted, his manner instantly changing. He was a short, heavily built man, cleanly shaven, with dark, arrogant eyes, and prominent chin.

"You are a sergeant of the Seventh, you said," he began brusquely. "What were you doing here?"

"My troop is stationed at Fort Union," was the quiet response. "I carried despatches to Devere, and while there was requested by Major McDonald to intercept his daughter and turn her back."

"Were you subject to Major McDonald's orders?"

"It was not an order, but a request."

"Oh, indeed; a mere pleasure excursion."

"It has hardly turned out that way, sir, and conditions seemed to justify my action."

"That is for others to determine. When was the attack made?"

"Just before sundown last evening. The driver and guard escaped on the lead horses, and the wheelers ran away, wrecking the coach."

"There were four passengers?"

"Yes; we fought them off until after dark, although the Mexican was killed by the first fire. I don't know when the other man got his."

"Who were they?"

"Gonzales ran a high-ball game at Santa Fé; the other, Moylan, was post-sutler at Fort Marcy."

"How many Indians? Who were they?"

"About thirty; we must have killed five or six. It was hardly more than daylight when they left, and I could not tell just how many bodies they strapped on the ponies. They were a mixed bunch of young bucks, principally Arapahoes, led by Roman Nose."

"Went west, hey?"

"Yes, sir."

The Lieutenant turned his gaze up the river, and then looked at Wasson, who remained seated in the saddle.

"Must be the same lot Maxwell told us about up on Pawnee Fork, Sam," he said at last. "He will be likely to cut their trail some time to-day. We knew a bunch had headed south, but did n't suppose they had

got as far as this already. Better leave Maxwell to run them in, I suppose? Our orders are to return to Dodge."

"They have n't three hours the start," ventured Hamlin in surprise, "and cannot travel fast with so many of their ponies doubly loaded."

"That is for me to decide," staring insolently, "and I understand my duty without any advice. Is there any damage done west of here?"

"The station at the crossing is burned; two dead men there; I don't know what became of the third."

"Then it is just as I thought; those fellows will turn north before they get that far, and will run straight into Maxwell. What do you say, Sam?"

The scout lolled carelessly in the saddle, his eyes on the river, his lean, brown face expressionless.

"I reckon as how it don't make no great difference what I say," he answered soberly. "Yer ain't taken no advice frum me yit, fur as I remember. But if yer really want ter know, this time, my notion is them bucks will most likely hide in the bluffs till night, an' then sneak past Maxwell after it gits good an' dark. If this yere wus my outfit now, I 'd just naturally light on to the trail fast, orders er no orders. I reckon it 's

Injuns we cum out after, an' I don't suppose the War Department would find any fault if we found a few."

The blood surged into the Lieutenant's face, but opposition only served to increase his obstinacy.

"I prefer to rely on my own judgment," he said tartly. "From what this man reports they are in stronger force than we are. Besides my instructions were not to provoke hostilities."

Wasson grinned, revealing his yellow teeth.

"Sure not; they are so damned peaceable themselves."

"I prefer leaving Captain Maxwell to deal with the situation," Gaskins went on pompously, ignoring the sneer, "as he outranks me, and I am under strict instructions to return at once to the fort. Two of our horses are disabled already, and Smiley is too sick to be left alone. There are only sixteen men fit for duty, and three of those would have to be detailed to look after him. I 'll not risk it. Well," he broke off suddenly, and addressing a corporal who had just ridden up and saluted, "have you buried the bodies?"

"Yes, sir; found these papers on them."

The Lieutenant thrust these into his jacket pocket.

"Very well, Hough. Form the men into column.

Miss McDonald, you will retain the horse you have, and I should be very glad to have you ride with me. Oh, Corporal, was everything in the coach destroyed? Nothing saved belonging to this lady?"

"Only the ironwork is left, sir."

"So I thought; exceedingly sorry, Miss McDonald. The ladies at Dodge will have to fit you out when we get in. I am a bachelor, you know," he added, glancing aside into her face, "but can promise every attention."

Her eyes sought Hamlin where he stood straight and motionless, respectfully waiting an opportunity to speak.

"Is — is this what I ought to do?" she questioned, leaning toward him. "I am so confused I hardly know what is best."

"Why, of course," broke in the Lieutenant hastily. "You may trust me to advise."

"But my question was addressed to Sergeant Hamlin," she interposed, never glancing aside. "He understands the situation better than you."

The Sergeant held his hat in his hand, his eyes meeting her own frankly, but with a new light in them. She had not forgotten now the danger was over; she meant him to realize her friendship.

"It seems to me the only safe course for you to take,

Miss McDonald," he said slowly, endeavoring to keep the note of triumph out of his voice. " Your father is perfectly safe, and will join you within a few days. I would not dare attempt your protection farther west."

" You are not going with us then? " she questioned in surprise.

" Not if Lieutenant Gaskins will furnish me with horse and rifle. I must report at Union, and, on the way, tell your father where you are."

" But the danger! oh, you must n't attempt such a ride alone! "

" That is nothing; the valley is swept clean, and I shall do most of my riding at night. Any plainsman could do the trick — hey, Sam? "

Wasson nodded, chewing solemnly on the tobacco in his cheek.

" He 'll make the trip all right, miss," he drawled lazily. " Wish I was goin' long. I 'm sure tired o' this sorter scoutin', I am. Down below the Cimarron is the only place ye 'll have ter watch out close, ' Brick.' Them Comanches an' Apaches are the worst lot."

" I know — night riders themselves, but I know the trail. Can you outfit me, Lieutenant? "

Gaskins smiled grimly, but with no trace of humor.

His eyes were upon the girl, still leaning over her pommel.

"I 'll outfit you all right," he said brusquely, "and with no great regret, either. And I shall report finding you here in disobedience to orders."

"Very well, sir."

Molly's brown eyes swept to the Lieutenant's face, her form straightening in the saddle, her lips pressed tightly together. Gaskins fronted the Sergeant, stung into anger by the man's quiet response.

"I shall prefer charges, you understand," almost savagely. "Helm, give this fellow that extra rifle, and ammunition belt. McMasters, you will let him have your horse."

Wasson rolled out of his saddle, muttering something indistinctly, which might have been an oath.

"I ain't goin' ter stand fer that, Leftenant," he said defiantly. "Bein' as I ain't no enlisted man, an' this yere is my hoss, 'Brick' Hamlin don't start on no such ride on that lame brute o' McMasters'. Here, you 'Brick,' take this critter. Oh, shut up! I 'll git to Dodge all right. Won't hurt me none to walk."

The eyes of the two men met understandingly, and Hamlin took the rein in his hand. Gaskins started to speak, but thought better of it. A moment he stood,

irresolute, and then swung up into saddle, his glance ignoring the Sergeant.

"Attention! company," he commanded sharply. "By column four — march!"

The girl spurred her horse forward, and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said, falteringly, "you — will be careful."

"Of course," and he smiled up into her eyes. "Don't worry about me — I am an old hand."

"And I am to see you again?"

"I shall never run away, surely, and I hope for the best —"

"Miss McDonald," broke in Gaskins impatiently, "the men are already moving."

"Yes," her eyes still upon the Sergeant's uncovered face, "I am coming. Don't imagine I shall ever forget," she murmured hastily, "or that I will not be glad to meet you anywhere."

"Some time I may put you to the test," he answered soberly. "If any trouble comes, trust Wasson — he is a real man."

He stood there, one arm thrown over the neck of the horse, watching them ride away up the trail. The Lieutenant and the girl were together at the rear of the

short column, and he seemed to be talking earnestly. Hamlin never moved, or took his eyes from her until they disappeared over the ridge. Just as they dipped down out of sight she turned and waved one hand. Then the man's gaze swept over the débris of the burned stage, and the two mounds of earth. Even these mute evidences of tragedy scarcely sufficed to make him realize all that had occurred in this lonely spot. He could not seem to separate his thought from the cavalcade which had just departed, leaving behind the memory of that farewell wave of the hand. To him it marked the end of a dream, the return to a life distasteful and lonely.

Mechanically the Sergeant loaded his rifle, and strapped the old Confederate haversack to his saddle pommel, staring again, half unbelieving, at the faded inscription underneath the flap. Yet the sight of those letters awoke him, bringing to his bronzed face a new look of determination. He swung into the saddle, and, rifle across his knees, his eyes studying the desolate distance, rode westward along the deserted trail.

CHAPTER XIII

BACK AT FORT DODGE

THE swiftly speeding weeks of that war-summer on the plains had brought many changes to the hard-worked troops engaged in the campaign or garrisoning the widely scattered posts south of the Platte. Scouting details, although constantly in the saddle, failed to prevent continued Indian depredations on exposed settlements. Stage routes were deserted, and the toiling wagons of the freighters vanished from the trails. Reports of outrages were continuous, and it became more and more evident that the various tribes were at length united in a desperate effort to halt the white advance. War parties broke through the wide-strung lines of guard, and got safely away again, leaving behind death and destruction. Only occasionally did these Indian raiders and the pursuing troops come into actual contact. The former came and went in swift forays, now appearing on the Pawnee, again on the Saline, followed by a wild ride down the valley of the Arkansas. Scattered in small bands, well

mounted and armed, no one could guess where the next attack might occur. Every day brought its fresh report of horror. From north and south, east and west, news of outrages came into Sheridan's headquarters at Fort Wallace.

Denver, at the base of the mountains, was practically in state of siege, provisioned only by wagon trains sent through under strong guard; the fringe of settlement along the water ways was deserted, men and women fleeing to the nearest government posts for protection and food. The troops, few in number and widely scattered in small detachments, many being utilized as scouts and guards, were unequal to the gigantic task of protecting so wide a frontier. Skirmishes were frequent, but the Indians were wary and resourceful, and only once during the entire summer were they brought into real decisive battle. The last of August, Major Forsythe, temporarily commanding a company of volunteer scouts, was suddenly attacked by over a thousand warriors under command of Roman Nose. A four days' fight resulted, with heavy loss on both sides, the Indians being finally driven from the field by the opportune arrival of fresh troops.

The general condition of affairs is well shown by the reports reaching Fort Wallace in September.

Governor Hunt wrote from Denver: "Just returned. Fearful condition of things here. Nine persons murdered by Indians yesterday, within radius of nine miles." A few days later, acting Governor Hall reported: "The Indians have again attacked our settlements in strong force, obtaining possession of the country to within twelve miles of Denver. They are more bold, fierce, and desperate in their assaults than ever before. It is impossible to drive them out and protect the families at the same time, for they are better armed, mounted, disciplined, and better officered than our men. Each hour brings intelligence of fresh barbarities, and more extensive robberies." This same month Governor Crawford, of Kansas, telegraphed, "Have just received a despatch from Hays, stating that Indians attacked, captured, and burned a train at Pawnee Fork; killed, scalped, and burned sixteen men; also attacked another train at Cimarron Crossing, which was defended until ammunition was exhausted, when the men abandoned the train, saving what stock they could. Similar attacks are of almost daily occurrence."

South of the Cimarron all was desolation, and war raged unchecked from the Platte to the Pecos. Sheridan determined upon a winter campaign, although he understood well the sufferings entailed upon the

troops by exposure on the open plains at that season. Yet he knew the habits of Indians; that they would expect immunity from attack and would gather in villages, subject to surprise. He, therefore, decided that the result would justify the necessary hardships involved. To this end smaller posts were abandoned, and the widely scattered soldiers ordered to central points in preparation for the contemplated movement. Devere had been deserted earlier, and Major McDonald had marched his men to Dodge, where Molly awaited his coming. Retained there on garrison duty, the two occupied a one-story, yellow stone structure fronting the parade ground. In October, orders to march reached " M " troop, Seventh Cavalry, at Fort Union, and the ragged, bronzed troopers, who all summer long had been scouting the New Mexican plains, turned their horses' heads to the northeast in hopefulness of action. With them up the deserted Santa Fé trail, past burned stations and wrecks of wagon trains, rode Sergeant Hamlin, silent and efficient, the old Confederate haversack fastened to his saddle, and his mind, in spite of all effort, recurring constantly to the girl who had gone to Dodge early in the summer. Was she still there? If so, how would she greet him now after these months of absence? The little cavalry

column, dust-covered and weary, seemed fairly to creep along, as day by day he reviewed every word, every glance, which had passed between them; and at night, under the stars, he lay with head on his saddle, endeavoring to determine his course of action, both as to their possible meeting, and with regard to the following of the clue offered by the haversack. The time he had hoped for was at hand, but he could not decide the best course of action. He could only wait, and permit Fate to interfere.

Certain facts were, however, sufficiently clear, and the Sergeant faced them manfully. Not merely the fact that he was in the ranks, great as that handicap was, could have prevented an attempt at retaining the friendship of Molly McDonald. But he was in the ranks because of disgrace — hiding away from his own people, keeping aloof from his proper station in life, out of bitter shame. If he had felt thus before, he now felt it a thousand times more acutely in memory of the comradeship of her whose words had brought him a new gleam of hope. Never before had loneliness seemed so complete, and never before had he realized how wide was the chasm between the old and the new life. This constantly recurrent memory embittered him, and made him restless. Yet out of it all, there

grew a firmer determination to win back his old position in the world, to stamp out the lie through which that Confederate court-martial had condemned him. If Le Fevre were alive, he meant now to find him, face him, and compel him to speak the truth. The discovery of that haversack gave a point from which to start, and his mind centred there with a fixed purpose which obscured all else.

It was after dark when "M" troop, wearied by their long day's march across the brown grass, rode slowly up the face of the bluff, and into the parade ground at Fort Dodge. The lights of the guard-house revealed the troopers' faces, while all about them gleamed the yellow lamps, as the garrison came forth to welcome their arrival. Guided by a corporal of the guard the men led their horses to the stables, and, as they passed the row of officers' houses Hamlin caught a furtive glimpse in a radius of light that gave his pulses a sudden throb. She was here then — here! He had hardly dared hope for this. They would meet again; that could scarcely be avoided in such narrow quarters. But how? On what terms? He ventured the one swift glimpse at her — a slender, white-robed figure, one among a group of both men and women before an open door, through which the light streamed — heard

her ask, "Who are they? What cavalry troop is that?" caught the response in a man's voice, "'M' of the Seventh, from Fort Union," and then passed by, his eyes looking straight ahead, his hand gripping his horse's bit.

Thirty minutes later in the great barn-like barracks, he hung his accoutrements over the bed assigned him in the far corner, and, revolver belt still buckled about his waist, stood at the open window, striving to determine which of those winking lights shone from the house where he had seen her. There had been something in the eagerness of her voice which he could not forget, nor escape from. She had seemed to care, to feel an interest deeper than mere curiosity. The Sergeant's heart beat rapidly, even while he sternly told himself he was a fool. A hand touched his shoulder, and he wheeled about to grip Wasson's hand.

"Well, 'Brick,' old boy," said the scout genially, although his thin face was as solemn as ever; "so you fellows have come back to be in the shindy?"

"We 've been in it all summer, Sam," was the reply. "It 's been lively enough south of the Cimarron, the Lord knows. I 've been riding patrol for months now. But what 's up? No one seems to know why we were ordered in."

"It 's all guess-work here," and Wasson sat down on the narrow bed and lit his pipe. "But the 'old man' is getting something under way, consolidating troops. Your regiment is going to be used, that 's certain. I 've been carryin' orders between here an' Wallace for three weeks now, an' I 've heard Sheridan explode once or twice. He 's tired of this guerilla business, an' wants to have one good fight."

"It is getting late."

"That 's the way he figures it out, accordin' to my notion. We 've always let those fellows alone during the bad weather, an' they 've got so they expect it. The 'old man' figures he 'll give 'em a surprise."

"A winter campaign?"

"Why not? We can stand it if they can. O' course, I 'm just guessin'; there 's no leak at headquarters. But Custer 's up there," with a wave of the hand to the north, "and they 've got the maps out."

"What maps?"

"I only got a glimpse of them out of the tail of my eye, but I reckon they was of the kintry south of the Arkansas, along the Canadian."

Hamlin sat down beside him, staring across the big room.

"Then it 's Black Kettle; his band is down on the Washita," he announced. "I hope it 's true."

"They 're arrangin' supply depots, anyhow; six companies of infantry are on Monument Creek, and five troops of cavalry on the North Canadian a'ready. Wagon trains have been haulin' supplies. There 's some stiff work ahead when the snow flies, or I miss my guess."

Hamlin sat silent, thinking, and the scout smoked quietly, occasionally glancing toward his companion. Finally he spoke again, his voice barely audible.

"That little girl you sent in with us is here yet."

The Sergeant was conscious that his cheeks flamed, but he never looked up.

"Yes, I saw her as we came in."

"She 's asked me about you once or twice; don't seem to forget what you did for her."

"Sorry to hear that."

"No, yer not; could n't no man be sorry to have a girl like that take an interest in him. 'T ain't in human nature. What did yer tell her about me?"

"Tell her!" surprised. "Why, I only advised her to hang close to you if anything happened. I did n't exactly like the style of the Lieutenant."

"Thet 's wat I thought. Well, she 's done it, though thet has n't pried her loose from Gaskins. He 's hauntin' her like a shadow. It 's garrison talk they 're engaged, but I ain't so sure 'bout thet. She an' I hev got to be pretty good friends, though, o' course, it 's strictly on the quiet. I ain't got no invite to officers' row yit. She 's asked me a lot 'bout you."

"Interesting topic."

"Well, I reckon as how she thinks it is, enyhow. Yesterday she asked me 'bout thet scrimmage yer hed down on the Canadian. She 'd heerd 'bout it somehow, an' wanted the story straight. So I told her all I knowed, an' yer oughter seed her eyes shine while I wus sorter paintin' it up."

"Oh, hell; let 's drop it," disgustedly. "The Lieutenant here yet?"

"Sure; his company is down on Monument, but he got special detail. He 's got a pull, Gaskins has."

"How is that?"

"His old man is Senator, or something, an' they say, has scads o' money. Enyway, the kid finds the army a soft snap. First scoutin' detail he ever had when you met him. Did n't hunt no danger then, so fur as I could see. Nice little dude, with a swelled head, but popular with the ladies. I reckon McDonald

ain't objectin' none to his chasin' after Miss Molly; thet 's why he 's let her stay in this God-forsaken place so long. Well, 'Brick,' I reckon I 've told all the news, and hed better move 'long."

"Hold on a minute, Sam," and Hamlin, suddenly recalled to earth, reached for the haversack hanging on the iron bedpost. "Moylan, the fellow who was killed in the coach with us, had this bag. According to Miss McDonald, he bought it here just before starting on the trip. See this inscription; those are the initials of an old acquaintance of mine I 'd like to trace. Any idea where Moylan found it?"

Wasson held the bag to the light studying the letters.

"Fourth Texas — hey? That your regiment?"

The Sergeant nodded, his lips tightly pressed together.

"Must hev come from Dutch Charlie's outfit," the scout went on slowly. "He picks up all that sorter truck."

"Where is that?"

"In town thar, under the bluff. We 'll look it up to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIV

UNDER ARREST

ONE by one the barrack lights went out as the tired troopers sought their beds. Hamlin extinguished his also, and only one remained burning, left for emergency near the door, which flung a faint glow over the big room. But the Sergeant's reflections kept him awake, as he sat on the foot of his bed, and stared out of the open window into the darkness. There was little upon which to focus his eyes, a few yellow gleams along officers' row, where callers still lingered, and the glow of a fire in front of the distant guard-house, revealing occasionally the black silhouette of a passing sentinel. Few noises broke the silence, except the strains of some distant musical instrument, and a voice far away saying good-night. Once he awoke from revery to listen to the call of the guards, as it echoed from post to post, ceasing with "All well, Number Nine," far out beyond the stables.

The familiar sound served to recall him to the reality of his position. What was the use? What business

had he to dream? For months now he had kept that girl's face before him, in memory of a few hours of happiness when he had looked into her dark eyes and heard her pleasant speech. Yet from the first he had known the foolishness of it all. He was nothing to her, and could never become anything. Even if he cleared his past record and stepped out of the ranks into his old social position, the chances were she would never overlook what he had been. Her gratitude meant little, nor her passing interest in his army career. All that was the natural result of his having saved her life. He possessed no egotism which permitted him to think otherwise. Years of discipline had drilled into him a consciousness of the impassable gulf between the private and the officer's daughter. The latter might be courteous, kindly disposed, even grateful for services rendered, but it must end there. The Major would see that it did, would resent bitterly any presumption. No, there was nothing else possible. If they met — as meet they must in that contracted post — it would be most formal, a mere exchange of reminiscence, gratitude expressed by a smile and pleasant word. He could expect no more; might esteem himself fortunate, indeed, to receive even that recognition. Meanwhile he would endeavor to strike Le Fevre's trail. There

were other interests in the world to consider besides Molly McDonald, and his memory drifted away to a home he had not visited in years. But thought would not concentrate there, and there arose before him, as he lay there, the face of Lieutenant Gaskins, wearing the same expression of insolent superiority as when they had parted out yonder on the Santa Fé trail.

"The cowardly little fool," he muttered bitterly under his breath, gripping the window frame. "It will require more than his money to bring her happiness, and I 'll never stand for *that*. Lord! She 's too sensible ever to love him. Good God — what 's that!"

It leaped out of the black night — three flashes, followed instantly by the sharp reports. Then a fourth — this time unmistakably a musket — barked from behind officers' row. In the flare, Hamlin thought he saw two black shadows running. A voice yelled excitedly, "Post Six! Post Six!" With a single leap the Sergeant was across the sill, and dropped silently to the ground. Still blinded by the light he ran forward, jerking his revolver from the belt. As he passed the corner of the barracks the sentry fired again, the red flash cleaving the night in an instant's ghastly vividness. It revealed a woman shrinking against the yellow stone

wall, lighted up her face, then plunged her again into obscurity.

The Sergeant caught the glimpse, half believing the vision a phantasy of the brain; he had seen her face, white, frightened, agonized, yet it could not have been real. He tripped over the stone wall and half fell, but ran on, his mind in a turmoil, but certain some one was racing before him down the dark ravine. There had been a woman there! He could not quite blot that out — but not she; not Molly McDonald. If — if it were she; if he had really seen her face in the flare, if it was no dream, then what? Why, he must screen her from discovery, give her opportunity to slip away. This was the one vague, dim thought which took possession of the man. It obscured all else; it sent him blindly crashing over the edge of the ravine. He heard the sentry at his right cry hoarsely, he heard excited shouts from the open windows of the barracks; then his feet struck a man's body, and he went down headlong.

Almost at the instant the sentry was upon him, a gun-muzzle pressing him back as he attempted to rise.

"Be still, ye hell hound," was the gruff order, "or I 'll blow yer to kingdom come! Sergeant of the guard, quick here! Post Number Six!"

Hamlin lay still, half stunned by the shock of his fall, yet conscious that the delay, this mistake of the sentry, would afford her ample chance for escape. He could hear men running toward them, and his eyes caught the yellow, bobbing light of a lantern. His hand reached out and touched the body over which he had fallen, feeling a military button, and the clasp of a belt — it was a soldier then who had been shot. Could she have done it? Or did she know who did? Whatever the truth might be, he would hold his tongue; let them suppose him guilty for the time being; he could establish innocence easily enough when it came to trial. These thoughts flashed through his mind swiftly; then the light of the lantern gleamed in his eyes, and he saw the faces clustered about.

"All right, Mapes," commanded the man with the light. "Let the fellow up until I get a look at him. Who the hell are you?"

"Sergeant Hamlin, Seventh Cavalry."

"Darned if it ain't. Say, what does all this mean, anyhow? Who 's shot? Turn the body over, somebody. By God! It 's Lieutenant Gaskins!"

Hamlin's heart seemed to leap into his throat and choke him; for an instant he felt faint, dazed, staring down into the still face ghastly under the rays of the

lantern. Gaskins! Then she *was* concerned in the affair; he really had seen her hiding there against the wall. And the man's eyes were open, were staring in bewilderment at the faces. The Sergeant of the guard thrust the lantern closer.

"Lift his head, some o' yer, the man 's alive. Copley, get some water, an' two of yer run fer the stretcher — leg it now. We 'll have yer out o' here in a minute, Lieutenant. What happened, sir? Who shot yer?"

Gaskins' dulled eyes strayed from the speaker's face, until he saw Hamlin, still firmly gripped by the sentry. His lips drew back revealing his teeth, his eyes narrowing.

"That 's the one," he said faintly. "You 've got him!"

One hand went to his side in a spasm of pain, and he fainted. The Sergeant laid him back limp on the grass, and stood up.

"Where is your gun, Hamlin?"

"I dropped it when I fell over the Lieutenant's body. It must be back of you."

Some one picked the weapon up, and held it to the light, turning the chambers.

"Two shots gone, Sergeant."

"We heard three; likely the Lieutenant got in one of them. Sentry, what do you know about this?"

Mapes scratched his head, the fingers of his other hand gripping the prisoner's shoulder.

"Not so awful much," he replied haltingly, "now I come ter think 'bout it. 'T was a mighty dark night, an' I never saw, ner heard, nuthin' till the shootin' begun. I wus back o' officers' row, an' them pistols popped up yere, by the corner o' the barracks. I jumped an' yelled; thought I heerd somebody runnin' an' let drive. Then just as I got up yere, this feller come tearin' 'long, an' I naturally grabbed him. That 's the whole of it."

"What have you got to say, Hamlin?"

"Nothing."

"Well, yer better. Yer in a mighty bad box, let me tell yer," angered by the other's indifference. "What was the row about?"

The cavalryman stood straight, his face showing white in the glow of the lantern.

"I told you before I had nothing to say. I will talk to-morrow," he returned quietly. "I submit to arrest."

"I reckon yer will talk to-morrow, and be damn glad o' the chance. Corporal, take this fellow to the

guard-house, an' stay there with him. Here comes the stretcher, an' the doctor."

Hamlin marched off silently through the black night, surrounded by a detail of the guard. It had all occurred so suddenly that he was bewildered yet, merely retaining sufficient consciousness of the circumstances to keep still. If they were assured he was guilty, then no effort would be made to trace any others connected with the affair. Why Gaskins should have identified him as the assassin was a mystery — probably it was merely the delirium of a sorely wounded man, although the fellow may have disliked him sufficiently for that kind of revenge, or have mistaken him for another in the poor light. At any rate the unexpected identification helped him to play his part, and, if the Lieutenant lived, he would later acknowledge his mistake. There was no occasion to worry; he could clear himself of the charge whenever the time came; half his company would know he was in barracks when the firing began. There were women out on the walk, their skirts fluttering as they waited anxiously to learn the news, but he could not determine if she was among them. Voices asked questions, but the corporal hurried him along, without making any reply. Then he was thrust roughly into a stone-lined cell, and left alone. Out-

side in the corridor two guards were stationed. Hamlin sat down on the iron bed, dazed by the silence, endeavoring to collect his thoughts. The nearest guard, leaning on his gun, watched carefully.

Voices reached him from outside, echoing in through the high, iron-barred window, but they were distant, the words indistinguishable. As his brain cleared he gave no further thought to his own predicament, only considering how he could best divert suspicion from her. It was all a confused maze, into the mystery of which he was unable to penetrate. That it was Molly McDonald shrinking there in the dark corner of the barracks wall he had no doubt. She might not have recognized him, or imagined that he saw her, but that spear of light had certainly revealed a face not to be mistaken. White as it was, haggard with terror, half concealed by straggling hair, the identification was nevertheless complete. The very piteousness of expression appealed to him. She was not a girl easily frightened; no mere promiscuous shooting, however startling, would have brought that look to her face. He had seen her in danger before, had tested her coolness under fire. This meant something altogether different. What? Could it be that Gaskins had wronged the girl, had insulted her, and that she, in response, had shot

him down? In the darkness of conjecture there seemed no other adequate explanation. The two were intimate; the rumor of an engagement was already circulating about the garrison. And the stricken man had endeavored to shift the blame on him. Hamlin could not believe this was done through any desire to injure; the Lieutenant had no cause for personal dislike which would account for such an accusation. They had only met once, and then briefly. There was no rivalry between them, no animosity. To be sure, Gaskins had been domineering, threatening to report a small breach of discipline, but in this his words and actions had been no more offensive than was common among young officers of his quality. The Sergeant had passed all memory of that long ago. It never occurred to him now as of the slightest importance. Far more probable did it appear that Gaskins' only motive was to shield the girl from possible suspicion. When he had realized that Hamlin was a prisoner, that for some reason he had been seized for the crime, he had grasped the opportunity to point him out as the assassin, and thus delay pursuit. The chances were the wounded man did not even recognize who the victim was — he had blindly grasped at the first straw.

But suppose he had been mistaken? Suppose that

woman hiding there was some one else? Suppose he had imagined a resemblance in that sudden flash of revealment? What then? Would she care enough to come to him when she learned of the arrest? He laughed at the thought, yet it was a bitter laugh, for it brought back a new realization of the chasm between them. Major McDonald's daughter interesting herself in a guard-house prisoner! More than likely she would promptly forget that she had ever before heard his name. He must be growing crazy to presume that she permitted him to remain on her list of friendship.

He got up and paced the cell, noting as he did so how closely he was watched by the guard.

"Have you heard how badly the Lieutenant was hurt?" he asked, approaching the door.

The sentry glanced down the corridor.

"He 'll pull out, all right," he replied confidentially, his lips close to the door. "Nothin' vital punctured. You better go to bed, an' forget it till mornin'."

"All right, pardner," and Hamlin returned to the cot. "Turn the light down a little, will you? There, that 's better. My conscience won't trouble me, but that glare did."

With his face to the stone wall he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XV

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

IT was late in the forenoon when the heavily armed guard marched Hamlin across to the commandant's office. He had been surprised at the delay, but had enjoyed ample opportunity to plan a course of action, and decide how best to meet the questions which would be asked. He could clear himself without involving her, without even a mention of her presence, and this knowledge left him confident and at ease.

There were half a dozen officers gathered in the small room, the gray-bearded Colonel in command, sitting behind a table, with Major McDonald at his right, and the others wherever they could find standing room. Hamlin saluted, and stood at attention, his gray eyes on the face of the man who surveyed him across the table.

"Sergeant," the Colonel said rather brusquely, "you came in last night with 'M' troop, did you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had you ever met Lieutenant Gaskins before?"

"Once; he pulled me out of a bad scrape with a bunch of Indians out on the trail a few months ago."

"The same affair I spoke to you about," commented McDonald quietly. "The attack on the stage."

The Colonel nodded, without removing his eyes from the Sergeant's face.

"Yes, I know about that," he said. "And that was the only occasion of your meeting?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Sergeant Hamlin, I purpose being perfectly frank with you. There are two or three matters not easily explained about this affair. I am satisfied of your innocence; that you were not directly concerned in the shooting of Lieutenant Gaskins. Men of your troop state that you were in barracks when the shots were fired, and the wound was not made by a service revolver, but by a much smaller weapon. Yet there are circumstances which puzzle us, but which, no doubt, you can explain. Two shots had been fired from your revolver," and he pushed the weapon across the table.

"I rode ahead of the troop in march yesterday," Hamlin explained, "and fired twice at a jack-rabbit. I must have neglected to replace the cartridges. Private Stone was with me."

"Why did you submit to arrest so easily, without any attempt to clear yourself?"

The Sergeant's gray eyes smiled, but his response was quietly respectful.

"I was condemned before I really knew what had occurred, sir. The sentry, the Sergeant of the guard, and the Lieutenant all insisted that I was guilty. They permitted me no opportunity to explain. I thought it just as well to remain quiet, and let the affair straighten itself out."

"Yet your action threw us completely off the trail," broke in McDonald impatiently. "It permitted the really guilty parties to escape. Did you see any one?"

"Black smudges merely, Major, apparently running toward the ravine. My eyes were blinded, leaping from a lighted room."

McDonald leaned forward eagerly, one hand tapping the table.

"Was one of them a woman?" he questioned sharply.

Hamlin's heart leaped into his throat, but he held himself motionless.

"They were indistinguishable, sir; mere shadows. Have you reason to suspect there may have been a woman involved?"

The Major leaned back in his chair, but the commandant, after a glance at his officer, answered:

"The pistol used was a small one, such as a woman might carry, and there are marks of a woman's shoe plainly visible at the edge of the ravine. Lieutenant Gaskins was alone when he left the officers' club five minutes before the firing began. You are sure you have never had any controversy with this officer?"

"Perfectly sure, sir. We have never met except on the one occasion already referred to, and then scarcely a dozen words were exchanged."

"How then, Sergeant," and the Colonel spoke very soberly, "do you account for his denouncing you as his assassin?"

"I presumed he was influenced by my arrest, sir; that the shock had affected his brain."

"That supposition will hardly answer. The Lieutenant is not severely wounded, and this morning appears to be perfectly rational. Yet he insists you committed the assault; even refers to you by name."

The accused man pressed one hand to his forehead in bewilderment.

"He still insists I shot him?"

"Yes; to be frank, he 's rather bitter about it, and no facts we have brought to bear have any apparent

weight. He swears he recognized your face in the flare of the first discharge."

The Sergeant stood silent, motionless, his gaze on the Colonel's face.

"I do not know what to say, sir," he answered finally. "I was not there, and you all know it from the men of my troop. There has been no trouble between Lieutenant Gaskins and myself, and I can conceive of no reason why he should desire to involve me in this affair — unless," he paused doubtfully; "unless, sir, he really knows who shot him, and is anxious to shift the blame elsewhere to divert suspicion."

"You mean he may be seeking to shield the real culprit?"

"That is the only explanation that occurs to me, sir."

The Colonel stroked his beard nervously, his glance wandering to the faces of the other officers.

"That might be possible," he acknowledged regretfully, "although I should dislike to believe any officer of my command would be deliberately guilty of so despicable an act. However, all we can do now is endeavor to uncover the truth. You are discharged from arrest, Sergeant Hamlin, and will return to your troop."

Hamlin passed out the door into the sunshine, dimly conscious that his guarded answers had not been entirely satisfactory to those left behind. Yet he had said all he could say, all he dared say. More and more firmly there had been implanted in his mind a belief that Molly McDonald was somehow involved in this unfortunate affair, and that her name must be protected at all hazard. This theory alone would seem to account for Gaskins' efforts to turn suspicion, and when this was connected with the already known presence of a woman on the scene, and the smallness of the weapon used, the evidence seemed conclusive.

As far as his own duty was concerned, the Sergeant felt no doubt. Whatever might be the cause, there was no question in his mind but that she was fully justified in her action. Disliking the Lieutenant from the first, and as strongly attracted by the girl, his sympathies were now entirely with her. If she had shot him, then it was for some insult, some outrage, and he was ready to protect her with his life. He stopped, glancing back at the closed door, tempted to return and ask permission to interview Gaskins personally. Then the uselessness of such procedure recurred to him; the fact that nothing could result from their meeting but disappointment and recrimination. The man evidently

disliked him, and would resent any interference; he had something to conceal, something at stake for which he would battle strenuously. It would be better to let him alone at present, and try to uncover a clue elsewhere. Later, with more facts in his possession, he could face the Lieutenant and compel his acknowledgment. These considerations caused him to turn sharply and walk straight toward the ravine. Yet his investigations there brought few results. On the upper bank were the marks of a woman's shoe, a slender footprint clearly defined, but the lower portion of the ravine was rocky, and the trail soon lost. He passed down beyond the stables, realizing how easily the fugitives, under cover of darkness, could have escaped. The stable guard could have seen nothing from his station, and just below was the hard-packed road leading to the river and the straggling town. There was nothing to trace, and Hamlin climbed back up the bluff completely baffled but desperately resolved to unlock the mystery. The harder the solution appeared, the more determined he became to solve it. As he came out, opposite the barrack entrance, a carriage drove in past the guard-house, the guard presenting arms, and circled the parade in the direction of officers' row. It contained a soldier driver and two ladies, and the Ser-

geant's face blushed under its tan as he recognized Miss McDonald. Would she notice him — speak to him? The man could not forbear lifting his eyes to her face as the carriage swept by. He saw her glance toward him, smile, with a little gesture of recognition, and stood there bareheaded, his heart throbbing wildly. With that look, that smile, he instantly realized two facts of importance — she was willing to meet him on terms of friendship, and she had not recognized him the evening previous as he ran past her in the dark.

Hamlin, his thoughts entirely centred upon Miss McDonald, had scarcely noted her companion, yet as he lingered while the carriage drew up before the Major's quarters, he seemed to remember vaguely that she was a strikingly beautiful blonde, with face shadowed by a broad hat. Although larger, and with light fluffy hair and blue eyes, the lady's features were strangely like those of her slightly younger companion. The memory of these grew clearer before the Sergeant — the whiteness of the face, the sudden lowering of the head; then he knew her; across the chasm of years her identity smote him as a blow; his breath came quickly and his fingers clenched.

"My God!" he muttered, unconsciously. "That was Vera! She has changed, wonderfully changed, but

— but she knew me. What, in Heaven's name, can she be doing here, and — with Molly?"

With straining eyes he stared after them until they both disappeared together within the house. Miss McDonald glanced back toward him once almost shyly, but the other never turned her head. The carriage drove away toward the stables. Feeling as though he had looked upon a ghost, Hamlin turned to enter the barracks. An infantry soldier leaned negligently in the doorway smoking.

"You 're the sergeant who saved that girl down the trail, ain't yer?" he asked indolently. "Thought so; I was one o' Gaskins' men."

Hamlin accepted the hand thrust forth, but with mind elsewhere.

"Do you happen to know who that was with Miss McDonald?" he asked.

"Did n't see 'em, only their backs as they went in — nice lookin' blonde?"

"Yes, rather tall, with very light hair."

"Oh, that 's Mrs. Dupont."

"Mrs. Dupont?" the name evidently a surprise; "wife of one of the officers?"

"No, she 's no army dame. Husband 's a cattleman. Got a range on the Cowskin, south o' here, but

I reckon the missus don't like that sorter thing much. Lives in St. Louis mostly, but has been stoppin' with the McDonalds fer a month er two now. Heerd she wus a niece o' the Major's, an' reckon she must be, er thar 'd been a flare up long ago. She 's a high flyer, she is, an' she 's got the Leftenant goin' all right."

"Gaskins?"

"Sure; he 's a lady-killer, but thet 's 'bout all the kind o' killer he is, fer as I ever noticed — one o' yer he-flirts. Thar ain't hardly an officer in this garrison thet ain't just achin' fer ter kick that squirt, but ther women — oh, Lord; they think he 's a little tin god on wheels. Beats hell, don't it, what money will do fer a damn fool."

Hamlin stood a moment silent, half inclined to ask another question, but crushing back the inclination. Then he walked down the hall to the quarters assigned "M" Troop, and across to his own bed in the far corner. There were only a few of the men present, most of whom were busily engaged at a game of cards, and he sat down where he could gaze out the window and think. Here was a new complication, a fresh puzzle to be unravelled. He had never expected this woman to come into his life again; she had become a blurred, unpleasant memory, a bit of his past which he

had supposed was blotted out forever. Mrs. Dupont — then she had not married Le Fevre after all! He dully wondered why, yet was not altogether surprised. Even as he turned this fact over and over in his mind, speculating upon it, he became aware of a man leaving the rear door of McDonald's quarters, and advancing back of officers' row toward the barracks. As the fellow drew near, Hamlin recognized the soldier who had been driving the carriage. A moment later the man entered the room, spoke to the group of card players, and then came straight across toward him.

"Sergeant Hamlin?"

"Yes."

"I was asked to hand you this note; there is no answer."

Hamlin held it unopened until the fellow disappeared, hesitating between hope and dread. Which of the two women had ventured to write him? What could be the unexpected message? At last his eyes scanned the three short lines:

"You recognized me, and we must understand each other. At ten to-night ask the Clerk of the Occidental — V."

CHAPTER XVI

THE MEETING

HAMLIN'S first impulse was to ignore the note, trusting his position in the ranks would be sufficient barrier to prevent any chance meeting, and believing his stay at that garrison would be only a brief one. Sheridan was evidently preparing for an early offensive campaign, and it was rumored on all sides that the Seventh Cavalry had been selected for active field service. Indeed, the urgent orders for the consolidation of the regiment from scattered posts must mean this. Any day might bring orders, and he could easily avoid this Mrs. Dupont until then. Except for a faint curiosity, the Sergeant felt no inclination to meet the woman. Whatever influence she might have once exercised over him had been thoroughly overcome by years and absence. Even the unexpected sight of her again — seemingly as beautiful as ever — had failed to awaken the spell of the past. It was almost with a thrill of delight that Hamlin realized this — that he was in truth utterly free of her influence. There had

been times when he had anticipated such a possible meeting with dread; when he had doubted his own heart, the strength of his will to resist. But now he knew he stood absolutely independent and could laugh at her wiles. She who had once been all — trusted, loved, worshipped with all the mad fervor of youth — had become only a dead memory. Between them stretched a chasm never to be bridged.

What could the woman possibly want of him? To explain the past? To justify herself? He knew enough already, and desired to know no more. Could she hope — natural coquette that she was — to regain her hold upon him? The man smiled grimly, confident of his own strength. Yet why should she care for such a conquest, the winning of a common soldier? There must be some better reason, some more subtle purpose. Could it be that she feared him, that she was afraid that he might speak to her injury? This was by far the most likely supposition. Molly McDonald — the woman was aware of their acquaintance, and was already alarmed at its possible result.

Hamlin stood up resolved. He would meet the woman, not from any desire of his own, but to learn her purpose, and protect the girl. The meeting could not injure him, not even bring a swifter beating of the

heart, but might give him opportunity to serve the other. And Le Fevre — surely she could tell him something of Le Fevre.

Leave was easily obtained, and the Sergeant, rejoicing in a freshly issued uniform, dressed with all the care possible, his interest reviving at this new point of view. It was not far down the bluff road to the squalid little village which had naturally developed in close proximity to the fort — near enough for protection, yet far enough removed to be lawless — a rough frontier outpost town, of shacks and tents, most of these dispensing vile liquors. Among these, more enterprising spirits — hopeful of future development — had erected larger buildings, usually barn-like, with false fronts facing the single main street, filled with miscellaneous stocks of goods or used for purposes not so legitimate. One of these housed the " Poodle Dog " saloon, with gambling rooms above, while a few doors below was a great dance hall, easily converted into a theatre if occasion arose,— a grotesque, one-storied monstrosity. Below these was the stage office, built against the three-storied wooden hotel, which boasted of a wide porch on two sides, and was a picture of ugliness.

By daylight all was squalor and dirt, dingy tents

flapping in the ceaseless wind, unpainted shacks, wooden houses with boards warping under the hot sun, the single street deep in yellow dust, the surrounding prairie littered with tin cans, and all manner of débris. But with the coming of night much of this roughness departed. Soldiers from the garrison on pass, idle plainsmen, bull-whackers, adventurers of all kinds stranded here because of Indian activity, stray cowboys from the nearby valleys, thronged the numerous dives, seeking excitement. Women, gaudy of dress, shrill of voice, flitted from door to door through the jostling crowds. Lamps blazed over the motley assembly, loud-voiced barkers yelled, and a band added its discords to the din. The " Poodle Dog " glared in light, resounded with noise; lamps gleamed from the hotel windows, and the huge dance hall stood wide open. Out from the shacks and tents crept the day's sleepers for a night of revelry; along the trails rode others eager for excitement; it was the harvest-time of those birds of prey in saloon and gambling hell.

Hamlin saw all this, but gave the surroundings little thought. He was of the West, of the frontier, and beheld nothing unique in the scene. Moreover, the purpose for which he was there overshadowed all else, left him indifferent to the noise, the jostling, drunken

crowd. Some he met who knew him and called his name, but he passed them with a word, and pressed his way forward. At the hotel he mounted the steps and entered. The office was in one corner of the bar-room. The proprietor himself, a bald-headed Irishman, sat with feet cocked up on the counter, smoking, and barely glancing up as the Sergeant asked for Mrs. Dupont.

"Who are yer?" he asked.

"My name is Hamlin; I am here on the lady's invitation."

"Sure; thet 's ther name all right, me bhoy. Yer ter go out on the east porch there, an' wait a bit whoile I sind her worrd yer here. Oi 'm imaginin' she hed sum doubts about yer comin', the way she spoke."

"How do I get there?"

"Through the winder of the parlur over thar — sure, it 's a noice quiet spot fer a tate-a-tate." He got up, and peered through his glasses across the room. "Here, Moike; damn thet slapy head. Will one o' yer gents wake the lad — that 's it. Now come here, Moike. You run over to the Palace an' tell Mrs. Dupont the fellar is here waitin'. Hold on now, not so fast; wait till Oi 'm done tellin' yer. Say thet to her alone — do yer moind thet, ye sap-head; nobody

else is to hear whut yer say; stay there till yer git a chance ter whisper it to her. Now skip."

Hamlin hesitated, watching the boy disappear.

"At the Palace — the dance hall across the street?" he asked incredulously.

"Sure," indifferently, relighting his pipe. "Officers' ball; could n't break in with a can-opener unless you had a invite. Guards at both ends, sergeant taking tickets, an' Third Regiment Band makin' music. Hell of a swell affair; got guests here from Leavenworth, Wallace, and all around. Every room I got is full an' runnin' over — say, there are fellars over thar in them fool swaller-tail coats; damned if there ain't. If the b'ys ever git sight of 'em on the street there 'll be a hot time. Say, ain' that the limit? Injuns out thar thick as fleas on a dog, an' them swells dancin' here in swaller-tails like this yere was Boston."

He was still talking when Hamlin crossed the narrow hall and entered the dimly-lighted, unoccupied parlor. The side window was open, a slight breeze rustled the heavy curtain, and the Sergeant stepped outside on to the dark porch. There was a bench close to the rail and he sat down to wait. A gleam of light from the Palace fell across the western end, but the remainder of the porch lay in shadow, although he could look up

the street, and see the people jostling back and forth in front of the Poodle Dog. The sound of mingled voices was continuous, occasionally punctuated by laughter, or an unrestrained outburst of profanity. Once shots echoed from out the din, but created no apparent excitement, and a little later a dozen horsemen spurred recklessly through the street, scattering the crowd, their revolvers sputtering. Some altercation arose opposite and a voice called loudly for the guard, but the trouble soon ceased with the clump of hoofs, dying away in the distance, the regimental band noisily blaring out a waltz. Hamlin, immersed in his own thoughts, scarcely observed the turmoil, but leaned, arms on railing, gazing out into the darkness. Something mysterious from out the past had gripped him; he was wondering how he should greet her when she came; speculating on her purpose in sending for him.

It seemed as though he waited a long time before the curtain at the window was thrust aside and the lady emerged, the slight rustling of her dress apprising him of her presence. The curtain still held slightly back by her hand permitted the light from within to reflect over her figure, revealing in softened outline the beauty of her features, the flossy brightness of her hair. She was in evening dress, a light shawl draping her

shoulders. An instant she paused in uncertainty, striving to distinguish his face; then stepped impulsively forward, and held out her hands.

"I have kept you waiting, but you must forgive that, as I came as soon as I could manufacture an excuse. Won't you even shake hands with me?"

"Is it necessary?" he asked, almost wearily. "You have come to me for some purpose surely, but it can hardly be friendship."

"Why should you say that?" reproachfully. "I have deserted a rather brilliant party to meet you here."

"That, perhaps, is why I say it, Mrs. Dupont. If my memory serves, you would not be inclined to leave such friends as you have yonder to rendezvous with a common soldier, unless you had some special object in view. If you will inform me what it is, we can very quickly terminate the interview."

She laughed, a little touch of nervousness in the voice, but drew her skirts aside, and sat down on the bench.

"Do you think you can deceive me by such play-acting?" she asked eagerly. "You are no man of wood. Tell me, is there nothing you care to ask me, after — after all these years?"

Hamlin lifted his eyes and looked at her, stirred

into sudden interest by the almost caressing sound of the soft voice.

"Yes," he said slowly, "there are some things I should like to know, if I thought you would answer frankly."

"Try me and see."

"Then why are you Mrs. Dupont, instead of Mrs. Le Fevre?"

"Then my guess is true, and you are not so devoid of curiosity," she laughed. "My answer? Why, it is simplicity itself — because I was never Mrs. Le Fevre, but am rightfully Mrs. Dupont."

"Do you mean you were never married to Le Fevre?"

"What else could I mean?"

"Then he lied."

She shrugged her white shoulders.

"That would not surprise me in the least. 'T was a characteristic of the man you had ample reason to know. How came you to believe so easily?"

"Believe? What else could I believe? Everything served to substantiate his boast. I was in disgrace, practically drummed out of camp. There was nothing left for me to live for, or strive after. I was practically dead. Then your letter confessing came —"

"Wait," she interrupted, "that letter was untrue, false; it was penned under compulsion. I wrote you again, later, but you had gone, disappeared utterly. I wanted to explain, but your own people even did not know where you were — do not know yet."

He leaned his body against the rail, and looked at her in the dim light. Her face retained much of its girlish attractiveness, yet its undoubted charms no longer held the man captive. He smiled coldly.

"The explanation comes somewhat late," he replied deliberately. "When it might have served me it was not offered — indeed, you had conveniently disappeared. But I am not here to criticise; that is all over with, practically forgotten. I came at your request, and presume you had a reason. May I again ask what it was?"

CHAPTER XVII

AT CROSS-PURPOSES

SHE sat for a moment silent, gazing up the street, but breathing heavily. This was not the reception she had anticipated, and it was difficult to determine swiftly what course she had best pursue. Realizing the hold she had once had upon this man, it had never occurred to her mind that her influence had altogether departed. Her beauty had never failed before to win such victory, and she had trusted now in reviving the old smouldering passion into sudden flame. Yet already she comprehended the utter uselessness of such an expectation — there was no smouldering passion to be fanned; his indifference was not assumed. The discovery angered her, but long experience had brought control; it required only a moment to readjust her faculties, to keep the bitterness out of her voice. When she again faced him it was to speak quietly, with convincing earnestness.

"Yes, I realize it is too late for explanations," she acknowledged, "so I will attempt none. I wished you

to know, however, that I did not desert you for that man. This was my principal purpose in sending for you."

"Do you know where he is?"

She hesitated ever so slightly, yet he, watching her closely, noted it.

"No; at the close of the war he came home, commanding the regiment which should have been yours. Within three months he had converted all the family property into cash and departed. There was a rumor that he was engaged in the cattle business."

"You actually expect me to believe all this — that you knew nothing of his plans — were not, indeed, a part of them?"

"I am indifferent as to what you believe," she replied coldly. "But you are ungentlemanly to express yourself so freely. Why should you say that?"

"Because I chance to know more than you suppose. Never mind how the information reached me; had it been less authentic you might find me now more susceptible to your presence, more choice in my language. A carefully conceived plot drove me from the Confederate service, in which you were as deeply involved as Le Fevre. Its double object was to advance him in rank and get me out of the way. The plan worked

perfectly; I could have met and fought either object alone, but the two combined broke me utterly. I had no spirit of resistance left. Yet even then — in spite of that miserable letter — I retained faith in you. I returned home to learn the truth from your own lips, only to discover you had already gone. I was a month learning the facts; then I discovered you had married Le Fevre in Richmond; I procured the affidavit of the officiating clergyman. Will you deny now?"

"No," changing her manner instantly —"what is the use? I married the man, but I was deceived, misled. There was no conspiracy in which I was concerned. I did not know where you were; from then until this afternoon I never saw or heard of you. Molly told me of her rescue by a soldier named Hamlin, but I never suspected the truth until we drove by the barracks. Then I yielded to my first mad impulse and sent that note. If you felt toward me with such bitterness, why did you come here? Why consent to meet me again?"

"My yielding was to a second impulse. At first I decided to ignore your note; then came the second consideration — Miss McDonald."

"Oh," and she laughed, "at last I read the riddle. Not satisfied with saving that young lady from

savages, you would also preserve her youthful innocence from the contamination of my influence. Quite noble of you, surely. Are you aware of our relationship?"

"I have heard it referred to — garrison rumor."

"Quite true, in spite of your source of information, which accounts, in a measure, for my presence here as well as my intimacy in the McDonald household. And you propose interfering, plan to drive me forth from this pleasant bird's nest. Really you amuse me, Mr. Sergeant Hamlin."

"But I have not proposed anything of that nature," the man said quietly, rising to his feet. "It is, of course, nothing to me, except that Miss McDonald has been very kind and seems a very nice girl. As I knew something of you and your past, I thought perhaps you might realize how much better it would be to retire gracefully."

"You mean that as a threat? You intend to tell her?"

"Not unless it becomes necessary; I am not proud of the story myself."

Their eyes met, and there was no shadow of softness in either face. The woman's lips curled sarcastically.

"Really, you take yourself quite seriously, do you

not? One might think you still Major of the Fourth Texas, and heir to the old estate on the Brazos. You talked that way to me once before, only to discover that I had claws with which to scratch. Don't make that mistake again, Mr. Sergeant Hamlin, or there will be something more serious than scratching done. I have learned how to fight in the past few years — Heaven knows I have had opportunity — and rather enjoy the excitement. How far would your word go with Molly, do you think? Or with the Major?"

"That remains to be seen."

"Does it? Oh, I understand. You must still consider yourself quite the lady-killer. Well, let me tell you something — she is engaged to Lieutenant Gaskins."

His hand-grip tightened on the rail, but there was no change in the expression of his face.

"So I had heard. I presume that hardly would have been permitted to happen but for the existence of a Mr. Dupont. By the way, which one of you ladies shot the Lieutenant?"

It was a chance fire, and Hamlin was not sure of its effect, although she drew a quick breath, and her voice faltered.

"Shot — Lieutenant Gaskins?"

"Certainly; you must be aware of that?"

"Oh, I knew he had some altercation, and was wounded; he accused you, did he not? But why bring us into the affair?"

"Because some woman was directly concerned in it. Whoever she may be, the officers of the fort are convinced that she probably fired the shot; that the Lieutenant knows her identity, and is endeavoring to shield her from discovery."

"Why do they think that? What reason can they have for such a conclusion? Was she seen?"

"Her footprints were plainly visible, and the revolver used was a small one — a '36'— such as a woman alone would carry in this country. I have said so to no one else, but I saw her, crouching in the shadow of the barrack wall."

"You — you saw her? Recognized her?"

"Yes."

"And made no attempt at arrest? Have not even mentioned the fact to others? You must have a reason?"

"I have, Mrs. Dupont, but we will not discuss it now. I merely wish you to comprehend that if it is to be war between us, I am in possession of weapons."

She had not lost control of herself, yet there was

that about her hesitancy of speech, her quick breathing, which evidenced her surprise at this discovery. It told him that he had played a good hand, had found a point of weakness in her armor. The mystery of it remained unsolved, but this woman knew who had shot Gaskins; knew, and had every reason to guard the secret. He felt her eyes anxiously searching his face, and laughed a little bitterly.

"You perceive, madam," he went on, encouraged by her silence, "I am not now exactly the same unsuspecting youth with whom you played so easily years ago. I have learned some of life's lessons since; among them how to fight fire with fire. It is a trick of the plains. Do you still consider it necessary for your happiness to remain the guest of the McDonalds?"

She straightened up, turning her eyes away.

"Probably not for long, but it is no threat of yours which influences me. It does not even interest me to know who shot Lieutenant Gaskins. He is a vulgar little prig, only made possible by the possession of money. However, when I decide to depart I shall probably do so without consulting your pleasure." She hesitated, her voice softening as though in change of mood. "Yet I should prefer parting with you in friendship. In asking you to meet me to-night I had no

intention of quarrelling; merely yielded to an impulse of regret for the past —"

The heavy curtain draping the window was drawn aside, permitting the light from within to flash upon them, revealing the figure of a man in uniform.

"Pardon my interruption," he explained, bowing, "but you were gone so long, Mrs. Dupont, I feared some accident."

She laughed lightly.

"You are very excusable. No doubt I have been here longer than I supposed."

The officer's eyes surveyed the soldier standing erect, his hand lifted in salute. The situation puzzled him.

"Sergeant Hamlin, how are you here? On leave?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of course this is rather unusual, Captain Barrett," said the lady hastily, tapping the astonished officer lightly with her fan, "but I was once quite well acquainted with Sergeant Hamlin when he was a major of the Fourth Texas Infantry during the late war. He and my husband were intimates. Naturally I was delighted to meet with him again."

The Captain stared at the man's rigid figure.

"Good Lord, I never knew that, Hamlin," he ex-

claimed. "Glad to know it, my man. You see," he explained lamely, "we get all kinds of fellows in the ranks, and are not interested in their past history. I've had Hamlin under my command for two years now, and hanged if I knew anything about him, except that he was a good soldier. Were you ready to go, Mrs. Dupont?"

"Oh, yes; we have exhausted all our reminiscences. Good-bye, Sergeant; so glad to have met you again."

She extended her ungloved hand, a single diamond glittering in the light. He accepted it silently, aware of the slight pressure of her fingers. Then the Captain assisted her through the window, and the falling curtain veiled them from view.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANOTHER MESSAGE

HAMLIN sank back on the bench and leaned his head on his hand. Had anything been accomplished by this interview? One thing, at least — he had thoroughly demonstrated that the charm once exercised over his imagination by this beautiful woman had completely vanished. He saw her now as she was — heartless, selfish, using her spell of beauty for her own sordid ends. If there had been left a shred of romance in his memory of her, it was now completely shattered. Her coolness, her adroit changing of moods, convinced him she was playing a game. What game? Nothing in her words had revealed its nature, yet the man instinctively felt that it must involve Molly McDonald. Laboriously he reviewed, word by word, each sentence exchanged, striving to find some clue. He had pricked her in the Gaskins affair, there was no doubt of that; she knew, or at least suspected, the party firing the shot. She denied at first having been married to Le Fevre, and yet later had been com-

pelled to acknowledge that marriage. There then was a deliberate falsehood, which must have been told for a purpose. What purpose? Did she imagine it would make any difference with him, or did she seek to shield Le Fevre from discovery? The latter reason appeared the more probable, for the man must have been in the neighborhood lately, else where did that haversack come from?

So engrossed was Hamlin with these thoughts that he hardly realized that some one had lifted the window curtain cautiously. The beam of light flashed across him, disappearing before he could lift his head to ascertain the cause. Then a voice spoke, and he leaned back to listen.

"Not there; gone back to the dance likely, while we were at the bar."

"Nobody out there?" this fellow growled his words.

"Some soldier asleep with his head on the rail; drunk, I reckon. Who was she with this time?"

"Barrett."

"Who? Oh, yes, the fellow who brought in that troop of the Seventh. Lord, the old girl is getting her hooks into him early. Well, as long as Gaskins is laid up, she may as well amuse herself somewhere else.

Barrett is rather a good looker, is n't he? Do you know anything about the man? Has he got any stuff?"

"Don't know," answered the gruff voice. "He 's a West Pointer. Vera likes to amuse herself once in a while; that 's the woman of it. Heard from Gaskins to-night?"

"Oh, he' s all right," the man laughed. "That little prick frightened him though. Shut up like a clam."

"So I heard. He 'll pay to keep the story quiet, all right. As soon as he is well enough to come down here, we 'll tap his bundle. Swore he was shot by a cavalry sergeant, did n't he?"

"And sticks to it like a mule. Must have it in for that fellow. Well, it helped our get-a-way."

"Yes, we 're safe enough, unless Gaskins talks, and he 's so in love with the McDonald girl he 'll spiel out big rather than have any scandal now. Wish I could get a word with Vera to-night; she ought to see him to-morrow — compassion, womanly sympathy, and all that rot, you know, helps the game. Let 's drift over toward the Palace, Dan, and maybe I can give her the sign."

Hamlin caught a glimpse of their backs as they

passed out — one in infantry fatigue, the other, a heavier built man, fairly well dressed in citizen's clothes. Inspired by a desire to see their features the Sergeant swung himself over the rail, and dropped lightly to the ground. In another moment he was out on the street, in front of the hotel, watching the open door. The two passed within a few feet of him, clearly revealed in the light streaming from the dance hall. The soldier lagged somewhat behind, an insignificant, rat-faced fellow, but the larger man walked straight, with squared shoulders. He wore a broad-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes, and a black beard concealed the lower portion of his face. Hamlin followed as the two pushed their way up among the idle crowd congregated on the wooden steps, and peered in through the wide doorway. Satisfied that he would recognize both worthies when they met again, and realizing now something of the plot being operated, Hamlin edged in closer toward the sergeant who was guarding the entrance. The latter recognized him with a nod.

"Pretty busy, Masters?"

"Have been, but there will be a lull now; when they come back from supper there 'll be another rush likely.

Would you mind taking my job a minute while I go outside?"

"Not in the least; take your time. Let me see what the tickets look like. That 's all right — say, Masters, before you go, do you know that big duffer with a black beard in the front line?"

The other gave a quick glance down the faces.

"I 've seen him before; dealt faro at the Poodle Dog a while; said to be a gun-man. Never heard his name. Oh, yes, come to think about it, they called him 'Reb'— Confed soldier, I reckon. Ain't seen him before for a month. Got into some kind of a shootin' scrap up at Mike Kelly's and skipped out ahead of the marshal. Why?"

"Nothing particular — looks familiar, that 's all. Who 's the soldier behind him — the thin-faced runt?"

"Connors. Some river-rat the recruiting officers picked up in New York; in the guard-house most of the time; driver for Major McDonald when he happens to be sober enough."

"That is where I saw him then, driving the ladies. Knew I had seen that mug before."

Left alone, except for the infantry man at the other side of the entrance, and with nothing to do beyond

keeping back the little crowd of curious watchers thronging the steps, Hamlin interested himself in the assembly, although keenly conscious of those two men who continued to linger, staring into the brilliantly lighted room. That the two were closely involved with Mrs. Dupont in some money-making scheme, closely verging on crime, was already sufficiently clear to the Sergeant's mind. He had overheard enough to grasp this fact, yet the full nature of the scheme was not apparent. Without doubt it involved Gaskins as a victim; possibly Barrett also, but Hamlin was not inclined to interfere personally for the protection of either of these officers. They could look after themselves, and, if they succumbed to the charms of the lady, and it cost something, why, that was none of his affair. But somehow the suspicion had come to him that he had accidentally stumbled upon a more complicated plot than mere blackmail. Mrs. Dupont's intimacy with Molly, and the use she was making of her distant relationship with the Major to further her ends, made him eager to delve deeper into her real purpose. At least these two, apparently ignorant of their guest's true character, should be warned, or, if that was impossible, protected from imposture. Their open friendliness and social endorsement were the woman's

stock in trade at Dodge, and whatever the final *dénouement* might be, McDonald and his daughter would inevitably share in the ensuing disgrace of discovery. Even if they were not also victimized, they would be held largely responsible for the losses of others. Had Hamlin been a commissioned officer he would have known what to do — his plain duty as a friend would have taken form in a frankly spoken warning. But, as it was, the chains of discipline, of social rank, made it seemingly impossible for him to approach either the Major or his daughter openly. He did not actually know enough to venture such an interview, and mere suspicion, even though coupled with his former intimacy with the woman, was not sufficient excuse for his interference. The Major would treat the revelation with indifference, even disbelief, and Miss Molly might even resent his meddling in the affair. Besides he was not altogether convinced that the girl had not been actually present at, and in some manner connected with, the attack on Gaskins. The memory of that face, shrinking behind the corner of the barrack wall, remained clear in his mind. He might be mistaken, but perhaps it would be best to go slow.

It was a huge, bare hall, although the walls were concealed by flags, while other draperies were festooned

along the rafters. The band was stationed upon a raised platform at the rear, and a hundred couples occupied the floor. The men present were largely officers attired in dress-uniforms, although there was a considerable sprinkling of civilians, a few conspicuous in garments of the latest cut and style. Evidently invitations had been widely spread, and, considering time and place, liberally responded to. Among the women present the Sergeant saw very few he recognized, yet it was comparatively easy to classify the majority — officers' wives; the frontier helpmates of the more prominent merchants of the town; women from the surrounding ranches, who had deserted their homes until the Indian scare ceased; a scattered few from pretentious small cities to the eastward, and, here and there, younger faces, representing ranchmen's daughters, with a school-teacher or two. Altogether they made rather a brave show, occasionally exhibiting toilets worthy of admiring glances, never lacking ardent partners, and entering with unalloyed enthusiasm into the evening's pleasure. The big room presented a scene of brilliant color, of ceaselessly moving figures; the air was resonant with laughter and trembling to the dashing strains of the band. Primitive as it was in many respects, to Hamlin, long isolated in small

frontier posts, the scene was strangely attractive, his imagination responding to the glow of color, the merry chime of voices, the tripping of feet. The smiling faces flashed past, his ears caught whispered words, his eyes followed the flying figures. For the moment the man forgot himself in this new environment of thoughtless pleasure.

From among that merry throng of strangers. his eyes soon distinguished that one in whom he felt special interest — Mrs. Dupont, dancing now with McDonald, the rather corpulent Major exhibiting almost youthful agility under the inspiration of music. The lady talked with animation, as they circled among the others on the floor, her red lips close to her partner's ear, but Hamlin, suspicious and watchful, noted that her eyes were busy elsewhere, scanning the faces. They swept over him apparently unseeing, but as the two circled swiftly by, the hand resting lightly on the Major's shoulder was uplifted suddenly in a peculiar, suggestive movement. He stared after them until they were lost in the crowd, feeling confident that the motion of those white-gloved fingers was meant as a signal of warning. To whom was it conveyed? He glanced aside at the jam of figures in the doorway. Both the black-whiskered man and Connors had

disappeared. It *was* a signal then, instantly understood and obeyed.

The Sergeant had scarcely grasped this fact when his attention was diverted by the appearance of Miss McDonald. She was dancing with a civilian, an immaculately dressed individual with ruddy, boyish face. His intense admiration of his partner was plainly evident, and the girl, simply dressed in white, her cheeks flushed, her dark eyes bright with enjoyment, set Hamlin's cool nerves throbbing. He could not resist gazing at her, and, as their eyes met, she bowed, the full red lips parting in a smile of recognition. There was no reservation, no restraint in that quick greeting, as she whirled by; he could not fail to comprehend its full significance — she had not forgotten, had no desire to forget. What he imagined he read in her face swept all else from his mind instantly, and, with eager eyes, he followed her slight, girlish figure as they circled the hall. The music ceased, and he still watched as the lad led her to a seat, himself sinking into a chair beside her. Then the passing out of several men, who desired return checks, claimed his attention. When the last of these had disappeared, he glanced again in her direction. She was alone, and her young partner was walking toward him across the deserted

floor. The lad came to the door, which by now contained few loiterers, and stood there a moment gazing out into the street.

"Are you Sergeant Hamlin?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

"Miss McDonald requested me to hand you this note unobserved. I have no knowledge of its contents."

Hamlin felt the flutter of the paper in his palm, and stood silent, clinging to it, as the other carelessly recrossed the room. She was looking toward him, but he made no motion to unfold the missive, until his eyes, searching the chairs, had located Mrs. Dupont. The very secret of delivery made him cautious, made him suspect it had to do with that woman. She was beside the band-stand, still conversing with the Major, apparently oblivious to any other presence, her face turned aside. Assured of this, he opened the paper, and glanced at the few hastily scribbled lines.

"I trust you, and you must believe I do not do this without cause. During the intermission be in the hotel parlor."

CHAPTER XIX

A FULL CONFESSION

THERE were two more dances scheduled on the program. The last of these had begun before the infantry sergeant returned, and, apologizing for his long absence, resumed his duties at the door. Across the room, Hamlin's eyes met those of Miss McDonald, where she danced with an unknown officer; then he turned and elbowed his way to the street. The hotel opposite was all bustle and confusion, the bar-room crowded with the thirsty emergency waiters who had rushed about the hall completing final preparations. The Sergeant, intent on his purpose, and aware that the band had ceased playing, dodged past these and entered the parlor. It was already occupied by four men, who were playing cards at a small, round table and smoking vigorously, entirely engrossed in their game. None of them so much as glanced up, and the intruder hesitated an instant, quickly determining his course of action. There was little choice left. The girl would never make an appointment with him

except through necessity, and it was manifestly his duty to protect her from observation. Two of the men sitting there were strangers; the others he knew merely by sight, a tin-horn gambler called Charlie, and a sutler's clerk. His decision was swift, and characteristic.

"Gents," he said, stepping up, and tapping the table sharply, "you 'll have to vamoose from here."

"What the hell —" the gambler looked up into the gray eyes, and stopped.

"That 's all right, Charlie," went on Hamlin coolly, one hand at his belt. "Those are my orders, and they go. Hire a room upstairs if you want to keep on with the game. Pick up the stuff, you fellows."

"But see here," the speaker was upon his feet protesting. "The old man told us we could come in here."

"The old man's word don't go for this floor tonight, partner. It 's rented by the post officers. Now mosey right along, and don't come back unless you are looking for trouble — you too, Fatty."

Right or wrong there was plainly no use continuing the argument, for Hamlin's fingers were upon the butt of his revolver, and his eyes hardened at the delay.

The gambler's inclination was to oppose this summary dismissal, but a glance at his crowd convinced him he would have to play the hand alone, so he yielded reluctantly, swept the chips into the side pocket of his coat and departed, leaving behind a trail of profanity. The Sergeant smiled, but remained motionless until they disappeared.

"The bluff works," he thought serenely, "unless they make a kick at the office; some peeved, Charlie was."

He stepped over to the window, and held back the curtain. A burly figure occupied the bench, with feet upon the rail. Even in that outside dimness could be distinguished a black beard. The very man, and the Sergeant chuckled grimly with a swiftly born hope that the fellow might create a row. Nothing at that moment could have pleased him more. He blew out the parlor light, partially closed the door, and stepped forth on to the porch.

"Say, you," he said gruffly, dropping one hand heavily on the other's shoulder. "Did you hear what I said to those fellows inside? Well, it goes out here the same. Pack up, and clear the deck."

"Reb" dropped his feet to the floor and stood up, his bearded lips growling profanity, but Hamlin

gripped his wrist, and the man stopped, with mouth still open, staring into the Sergeant's face. All bravado seemed to desert him instantly.

"Who — who says so?" and he stepped back farther into the shadow.

"I do, if you need to know," pleasantly enough. "Sergeant Hamlin, Seventh Cavalry."

"Oh!" the exclamation came from between clenched teeth. "Hell, man, you startled me."

"So I see; nervous disposition, I reckon. Well, are you going quietly, or shall I hoist you over the rail?"

"I had an appointment here."

"Can't help that, partner. This porch is going to be vacant inside of one minute, or there is a declaration of war. Your easiest way out is through that window, but you can go by rail if you prefer."

The black beard wasted half his allowed time in an effort at bluster; then, to Hamlin's utter disgust, slunk through the open window and across the darkened parlor.

"The pusillanimous cuss," the latter muttered, "he 's worse than a cur dog. Blamed if he was n't actually afraid of me. A gun-fighter — pugh!" He lifted his voice, as "Reb" paused in the light of the

hall beyond and glanced back, a fist doubled and uplifted. "Oh, go on! Sure, you 'll get me? You are the brave boy, now," and Hamlin strode toward the door threateningly. "Lope along, son, and don't turn around again until you face the bar."

He drew the door partially to again, and sat down facing the opening, where a stray beam of light fell across the floor. Thus far the adventure had scarcely proven interesting. The last encounter had been a distinct disappointment. The dispersal of the card-players was, as anticipated, easily managed, but the reputation of "Reb" as killer and bad man had given him hope of resistance. But instead he had proven a perfect lamb. Hamlin crossed his legs and waited, his mind divided in wonder between what Miss McDonald might want, and the cowardice of the fellow just driven out. The man was actually afraid — afraid to start a row. Yet he had got to his feet with that intention; it was only after he had looked into Hamlin's face and asked his name, that he began to hedge and draw back. Could he have recognized him? Could Mrs. Dupont have warned him of danger in his direction? That would seem impossible, for the woman had not been with him for even a minute since their conversation. She had given him

a swift signal at the door of the dance hall, but that could scarcely account for his present desire to avoid trouble. An engagement? Probably with Mrs. Dupont. But what was the use of speculating? Perhaps when the girl came she would have some light to throw on these matters. Surely her sudden determination to see him privately must have connection with this affair.

These thoughts came swiftly, for his period of waiting proved to be but a short one. He heard the laughter and talk as the merry-makers came into the hotel from the dance hall, crowding the passage, and thronging in to where the tables were set. Then a rattle of dishes, and the steady shuffling of waiters rushing back and forth. Occasionally he could distinguish a shadow out in the hall, but never changed his motionless posture, or removed his eyes from the aperture, until she slipped noiselessly through and stood there panting slightly, her hand clasping the knob of the door. Apparently in the semi-darkness of the room she was uncertain of his presence, while her white dress touched by the outside reflection made her clearly visible.

"It is all right, Miss McDonald," he murmured hastily, arising. "There is nothing to fear."

"You are here — alone?"

"Yes," smiling in memory. "There were occupants when I first arrived, but they were persuaded to depart. I had a suspicion you might prefer it that way."

"Yes," puzzled by his manner, yet softly pushing the door back so as to exclude the light. "I can see better now. Are — are you sure no one can overhear? I have something to tell you — something important."

"There is no one else here, yet some one might stumble into this room. It is not private, you know. We shall be safer on the porch outside. Will you take my hand, and let me guide you?"

She did so unhesitatingly, but her fingers were cold, and he could feel the twitching of her nerves.

"You are frightened — not of me, surely?"

"Oh, no!" a slight catch in her voice, "but I am running such a risk venturing here. I — I had to pretend a sick-headache to get away. You must not condemn me until you hear why I came."

"I condemn? Hardly, Miss McDonald. I am merely a soldier receiving orders; 'mine not to question why.' Here is the window; now sit down on this bench. I 'll keep guard, and listen." His voice sank lower, a little touch of tenderness in it impossible to

disguise. "Are you in trouble? Is it something I can aid you to overcome?"

She did not answer at once but rested her chin in one hand, and turned her eyes away. Her breath came swiftly, as though she had not yet recovered from fright, and her face in the dim light looked white and drawn.

"Yes, you can," she began slowly, "I am sure you can. I — I came to you because there was no one else in whom I felt the same confidence. I know that sounds strange, but I cannot explain — only it seems natural to trust some people even when you do not know them very well. I do not suppose I know you very well; just those few hours we were together, but — somehow I think you are true."

"I certainly hope so," he put in earnestly. "I could n't very well help being — with you."

"I believe that," and she lifted her eyes to his face.

"Yet I do not wish you to think me bold, or — or indiscreet. You do not think so, do you?"

"That idea has never once occurred to me, Miss McDonald. I am only too glad to be of service."

"It is good of you to say that; you see, there was no one else."

"Your father?" he suggested.

"But that is the very trouble," she insisted, rejoicing that he had thus unconsciously opened the way to her confession. "It is because my father is involved, is completely in her toils, that I am compelled to appeal to you. He will not listen to a word against her."

"Her? You refer to Mrs. Dupont?"

"Of course; why, I had n't mentioned her name! How did you guess?"

"Because I am not entirely ignorant of conditions," he answered soberly. "Although I have only been at the post a short time, I have managed to see and hear a good deal. You know I chanced to become involved in the shooting of Lieutenant Gaskins, and then I saw you riding with Mrs. Dupont, and recognized her."

"Recognized?" in surprise. "Do you actually mean you knew her before?"

"Not as Mrs. Dupont, but as Vera Carson, years ago. She knew me at once, and sent your driver over to the barracks with a note."

"Why, how strange. She asked me so many questions, I wondered at the interest shown. Do you mind telling me what the note was about?"

"Not in the least. She referred to the past, and asked me to meet her."

"Were you — very intimate? Great friends?"

"We were engaged to be married," he acknowledged frankly, his eyes upon her face. "That was at the breaking out of the war, and I was in my senior college year. We met at school, and I was supposed to be the heir to a large property. She is a beautiful woman now, and she was a beautiful girl then. I thought her as good and true as she was charming. Since then I have learned her selfishness and deceit, that it was my money which attracted her, and that she really loved another man, a classmate."

She glanced up at him as he paused, but he resumed the story without being interrupted.

"The war came, and I enlisted at once, and received a commission. Almost our entire class went, and the man she really loved was next below me in rank."

"Eugene Le Fevre?"

"Yes; how did you know? Oh, I told you of him out there in the sand-hills. Well, I urged her to marry me before I went to the front, but she made excuses. Later, I understood the reason — she was uncertain as to my inheriting the property of an uncle. We were ordered to the Army of Northern Virginia. Once I went home on furlough, severely wounded. We were to be married then, but I had not sufficiently recovered when I was suddenly ordered back to the front. I

did suspect then, for the first time, that she was glad of the respite. I afterwards discovered that during all this time she was in correspondence with Le Fevre, who had been detailed on Early's staff. It was his influence which brought about my sudden, unexpected recall to duty. A few months later I was promoted major, and, at Fisher's Hill, found myself commanding the regiment. Early in the action Le Fevre brought me an order; it was delivered verbally, the only other party present a corporal named Shultz, a German knowing little English. Early's exact words were: 'Advance at once across the creek, and engage the enemy fiercely; a supporting column will move immediately.' Desperate as the duty involved appeared, there was nothing in the order as given to arouse suspicion. In obedience I flung my command forward, leading them on foot. We charged into a trap, and were nearly annihilated, and Shultz was either killed, or made prisoner. Two days later I was arrested under charges, was tried by court-martial, and dismissed from the service in disgrace. Early produced a copy of his written order; it read 'cautiously feel the enemy's position,' and Le Fevre went on the stand, and swore the original had been delivered to me. I had no witnesses."

She watched him with wide-open eyes, her lips parted.

"And she — this Vera Carson?"

The man laughed bitterly.

"Wrote him a letter, which the man actually had the nerve to show me when I was helpless, proving her falsity. I would not believe, and went back seeking her. But she had departed — no one knew where — but had first convinced herself that my name had been erased from my uncle's will. Two months later I heard that she married Le Fevre in Richmond."

"And she — that woman — actually asked you to meet her again to-night?"

"Yes."

"Did you?"

"I must plead guilty."

"Where?"

"Here; just where we are now; we were together half an hour."

She half arose to her feet, her hand grasping the rail.

"But I cannot understand. Why should you? Do you —"

"No; wait," he interrupted, venturing to touch her arm. "I came, not because of any interest in her, Miss Molly — but for you."

CHAPTER XX

MOLLY TELLS HER STORY

HER breath came in a little sob, and she sank back on the bench.

"For me? How do you mean?"

"Surely I had every reason to distrust her, to question her character, and I could not believe you realized the sort of woman she is. I felt it my duty to discover her purpose here, and to warn you if possible."

"And you have succeeded? You learned her purpose in your interview?"

"Not exactly," with regret. "My suspicion was merely stimulated. To tell the truth, we rather drifted into a renewal of our old quarrel. However, between what she said, and parts of another conversation overheard, I know there is a blackmailing conspiracy on foot in which you are involved. May I speak very frankly?"

"I certainly desire it," proudly. "I am not aware that I have anything to conceal."

"Apparently the scheme these people have on foot

originated about Lieutenant Gaskins. He is wealthy, I understand?"

"I have been told so; yes, I know he is."

"This knowledge, coupled with the fact of your engagement —"

"My what?"

"Your engagement. I had heard it rumored before, and Mrs. Dupont assured me it was true."

"But it is not true, Sergeant Hamlin"— indignantly. "I cannot imagine how such a report ever started. Lieutenant Gaskins has been very friendly; has —" her voice breaking slightly, "even asked me to marry him, but — but I told him that was impossible. He has been just as kind to me since, but there is nothing, absolutely nothing between us. I have never spoken about this before to any one."

If Hamlin's heart leaped wildly at this swift denial, there was no evidence of it in his quiet voice.

"The point is, Miss Molly, that Mrs. Dupont, and those connected with her, think otherwise. They are presuming on Gaskins' being in love with you. Mrs. Dupont can be very seductive. Little by little she has drawn the Lieutenant into her net. Believing him engaged to you, they have him now where he must either pay money for silence or be exposed. Just how

it was worked, I do not know. The shooting last night was done to convince him they were serious. The fact that Gaskins later denied knowing who his assailants were — even endeavored to accuse me — is abundant proof of their success." He hesitated, wondering at her silence. "What puzzles me most is why you were present."

"Present? Where?"

"At this quarrel with Gaskins last evening. As I ran by toward the scene of the shooting I passed you hiding at the angle of the barrack wall. Of course, I have mentioned the fact to no one. That was why I made no attempt to defend myself when arrested."

She gasped for breath, scarcely able to articulate.

"You believe that? You think that of me?"

"I may have been deceived; I hope so; there was but little light, and I got merely a glimpse," he explained hastily.

"You were deceived," impetuously. "I was not out of the house that evening. I was in the parlor with my father when those shots were fired. You are sure you saw a woman there — hiding?"

"There is no doubt of that; her foot-prints were plainly to be seen in the morning. This discovery, together with the size of the weapon used, resulted

in my immediate release. I saw her, and imagined her to be you. I cannot account for the mistake, unless you were in my mind, and — and possibly what I had heard of your connection with Gaskins. Then it must have been Mrs. Dupont. That looks reasonable. But she stays at your home, does she not?"

"She makes our house her headquarters, but is absent occasionally. Last night she was here at this hotel. Well, we are getting this straightened out a little — that is, if you believe me."

"Of course."

"Then I am going to question you. You spoke of overhearing a conversation?"

"Yes; it was after Mrs. Dupont had left. Captain Barrett came, and took her away. I was sitting here thinking when two men came into the parlor."

"Who were they? Do you know?"

"One was the soldier who drives you about — Connors; the other a black-bearded, burly fellow called 'Reb.'"

"Mr. Dupont."

"What? Is that Dupont? Lord! No wonder she 's gone bad. Why, I thought her husband was a ranchman down South somewhere! This fellow is a tin-horn."

"He did run cattle once, years ago. I think he was quite well off, but drank and gambled it away. Papa told me all about it, but I found out he was the man by accident. He — is the one I am really afraid of."

She stopped, her eyes deserting his face, and stared out into the darkness. He waited, feeling vaguely that he had not heard all she intended to say.

"What more do you know?" he asked. "What was it you expected of me?"

She turned again, aroused by the question.

"Yes, I must tell you as quickly as I can, before I am missed. I did not know about Mrs. Dupont and Lieutenant Gaskins. I realized there was something between them — a — a — slight flirtation, but scarcely gave that a thought. What brought me here was a much more serious matter, yet this new information helps me to comprehend the other — the motives, I mean. Mrs. Dupont's maiden name was Vera Carson?"

"Certainly; I knew her family well."

"She came here, and was received into our family as a daughter of my father's sister. If true, her maiden name would have been Sarah Counts. Papa had no reason to suspect the deceit. He does not now,

and I doubt if even your word would convince him, for he seems thoroughly under her influence. There has been such a change in him since she came; not all at once, you know, but gradual, until now he scarcely seems like the same man. I — I do not dislike Lieutenant Gaskins; he has been pleasant and attentive, but I do not care for him in any other way. Yet papa insists that I marry the man. Lately he has been very unkind about it, and — and I am sure she is urging him on. What can I do? It is all so unpleasant."

Hamlin shook his head, but without reply.

"You will not tell me! Then I will tell you I shall say no! no! no! in spite of them; I shall refuse to be sold. But how does that woman control my father?" she leaned closer in her earnestness, lowering her voice. "She has not won him by charms; he is afraid of her."

"Afraid? Are you certain of that?"

"Yes. I cannot tell you how I know; perhaps it is all womanly instinct, but I do know that he is terrorized; that he dare not oppose her wish. I have read the truth in his eyes, and I am sure he is harsh to me only because he is driven by some threat. What can it be?"

"You have never spoken to him of your suspicions? Asked him?"

"Yes and no. I tried once, and shall never forget the expression of his face. Then he turned on me in a perfect paroxysm of anger. I never even dared hint at the matter again."

The Sergeant stared out into the street, not knowing what to say, or how to advise. Almost unconscious of the action his hand stole along the rail until it touched hers.

"If the woman has not ensnared him by her usual methods," he said soberly, "and I think myself you are right about that, for I watched them together in the dance hall — I did not comprehend what it meant then, but it seemed to me he actually disliked being in her company — then she has uncovered something in his past of which he is afraid, something unknown to you, which he does not desire you ever to know."

"Yes," softly, "that must be true."

"No; it may not be true; it may all be a lie, concocted for a purpose. A clever woman might so manipulate circumstances as to convince him she held his fate in her hands. We must find that out in this case."

"But how, Sergeant Hamlin? He will not tell me."

"Perhaps she will tell me if I can reach her alone,"

he said grimly, "or else that husband of hers — Dupont. He 'll know the whole story. It would give me pleasure to choke it out of him — real pleasure. Then there 's Connors, just the sort of sneaking rat if he can be caught with the goods; only it is not likely he knows much. I shall have to think it all out, Miss Molly," he smiled at her confidently. "You see, I am a bit slow figuring puzzles, but I generally get them in time. You 've told me all you know?"

"Everything. It almost seems silly when I try to explain what I feel to another."

"Not to me. I knew enough before to understand. But, perhaps, you had better go — hush, some one is entering the parlor."

She got to her feet in spite of his restraining hand, startled and unnerved.

"Oh, I must not be seen here. Is there no other way?"

"No; be still for a moment; step back there in the shadow, and let me go in alone."

He stepped forward, his grasp already on the curtain, when a woman's voice spoke within:

"Yes, that was what I meant; he does not know you — yet. But you must keep away."

CHAPTER XXI

MOLLY DISAPPEARS

THE speaker was Mrs. Dupont, but Hamlin's one thought was to prevent any discovery of Miss McDonald. Without an instant's hesitation he drew aside the curtain, and stepped into the room.

"Pardon me," he said quietly, as the two started back at his rather abrupt entrance, "but I did not care to overhear your conversation. No doubt it was intended to be private."

The woman stepped somewhat in advance of her companion, as though to shield him from observation, instantly mastering her surprise.

"Nothing at all serious, Mr. Sergeant Hamlin," she retorted scornfully. "Don't be melodramatic, please; it gets on the nerves. If you must know, I was merely giving our ranch foreman a few final instructions, as he leaves to-morrow. Have you objections?"

"Assuredly not — your ranch foreman, you say?

The two started back at his rather abrupt entrance.

Met him before, I think. You are the fellow I ordered out of this room, are n't you?"

The man growled something unintelligible, but Mrs. Dupont prevented any direct reply.

"That 's all right, John," she broke in impatiently. "You understand what I want now, and need not remain any longer. I have a word to say myself to this man."

She waited an instant while he left the room; then her eyes defiantly met Hamlin's.

"I was told you had driven every one out of here," she said coldly. "What was the game?"

"This room was reserved —"

"Pish! keep that explanation for some one else. You wanted the room for some purpose. Who have you got out there?" she pointed at the window.

"Whether there be any one or not," he answered, leaning against the window frame, and thus barring the passage, "I fail to see wherein you are concerned."

She laughed.

"Which remark is equivalent to a confession. Dave," suddenly changing, "why should we quarrel, and misjudge each other? You cannot suppose I have forgotten the past, or am indifferent. Cannot you forgive the mistake of a thoughtless girl? Is

there any reason why we should not be, at least, friendly?"

There was an appeal in her voice, but the man's face did not respond.

"I cannot say that I feel any bitterness over the past," he answered lightly. "I am willing enough to blot that out. What I am interested in is the present. I should like to understand your purpose here at Dodge."

"Surely that is sufficiently clear. I am merely an exile from home, on account of Indian depredations. What more natural than that I should take refuge in my uncle's house."

"You mean Major McDonald?"

"Certainly — he was my mother's only brother."

"I think I have heard somewhere that the Major's only sister married a man named Counts."

She drew in her breath sharply.

"Yes, of course — her first husband."

"You were a daughter then of her first marriage?"

"Of course."

"But assumed the name of Carson when she married again?"

"That was when you met me."

"The change was natural enough," he went on.

"But why did you also become Vera in place of Sarah?"

"Oh, is that it? Well, never attempt to account for the vagaries of a girl," she returned lightly, as though dismissing the subject. "I presume I took a fancy to the prettier name. But how did you know?"

"Garrison rumor picks up nearly everything, and it is not very kind to you, Mrs. Dupont. I hope I am doing you a favor in saying this. Your rather open flirtation with Lieutenant Gaskins is common talk, even among enlisted men, and I have heard that your relations with Major McDonald are peculiar."

"Indeed!" with a rising inflection of the voice. "How kind of you, and so delicately expressed." She laughed. "And poor Major McDonald! Really, that is ridiculous. Could you imagine my flirting with him?"

"I have no recollection of using that term in this connection. But you have strange influence over him. For some reason the man is apparently afraid of you."

"Afraid of me? Oh, no! Some one has been fooling you, Dave. I am merely Major McDonald's guest. I wonder who told you that? Shall I guess?"

Before he could realize her purpose the woman took a hasty step forward, and swept aside the curtain,

thrusting her head past to where she could gain a view outside. Hamlin pressed her back with one hand, planting himself squarely before the window. She met his eyes spitefully.

"I was mistaken this time," she acknowledged, drawing away, "but I'd like to know why you were so anxious to prevent my looking out. Do you know whom I thought you had there?"

"As you please," rejoicing that the girl had escaped notice.

"That little snip of a Molly. You made a hit with her all right, and she certainly don't like me. Well, delightful as it is to meet you again, I must be going." She turned away, and then paused to add over her shoulder. "Don't you think it would be just as safe for you to attend to your own business, Sergeant Hamlin?"

"And let you alone?"

"Exactly; and let me alone. I am hardly the sort of woman it is safe to play with. It will be worth your while to remember that."

He waited, motionless, until assured that she had passed down the hall as far as the door of the dining-room. The sound of shuffling chairs evidenced the breaking up of the party, in preparation to return to

the ballroom. If Miss McDonald's absence were to escape observation, she would have to slip out now and rejoin the others as they left the house. He again turned down the light, and held back the curtain.

"The way is clear now, Miss Molly."

There was no response, no movement. He stepped outside, thinking the girl must have failed to hear him. The porch was empty. He stepped from one end to the other, making sure she was not crouching in the darkness, scarcely able to grasp the fact of her actual disappearance. This, then, was why Mrs. Dupont had failed to see any one when she glanced out. But where could the girl have gone? How gotten away? He had heard no sound behind him; not even the rustle of a skirt to betray movement. It was not far to the ground, five or six feet, perhaps; it would be perfectly safe for one to lower the body over the rail and drop. The matted prairie grass under foot would render the act noiseless. No doubt that was exactly the way the escape had been accomplished. Alarmed by the presence of those others, suspecting that the woman within would insist on learning whom Hamlin was attempting to conceal, possibly overhearing enough of their conversation to become frightened at the final outcome, Miss McDonald, in sudden desperation, had sur-

mounted the rail, and dropped to the ground. The rest would be easy — to hasten around the side of the house, and slip in through the front door.

Assured that this must be the full explanation, the Sergeant's cheerfulness returned. The company of officers and guests had already filed out through the hall; he could hear voices laughing and talking in the street, and the band tuning up their instruments across in the dance hall. He would go over and make certain of her presence, then his mind would be at ease. He passed out through the deserted hallway, and glanced in at the dining-room, where a number of men were gathering up the dishes. Beyond this the bar-room was crowded, a riffraff lined up before the sloppy bar, among these a number in uniform — unattached officers who had loitered behind to quench their thirst. Hamlin drank little, but lingered a moment just inside the doorway, to observe who was present. Unconsciously he was searching for Dupont, half inclined to pick a quarrel deliberately with the fellow or with Connors, determined if he found the little rat alone to frighten whatever knowledge he possessed out of him. But neither worthy appeared. Having assured himself of their absence, Hamlin turned to depart, but found himself facing a little man with long hair,

roughly dressed, who occupied the doorway. The hooked nose, and bright eyes, peering forth from a mass of untrimmed gray whiskers, were familiar.

"You keep the junk shop down by the express office, don't you?"

"Yep," briskly, scenting business in the question. "I 'm Kaplan; vot could I do for you — hey?"

"Answer a question if you will, friend. Do you recall selling a haversack to a traveller on the last stage out for Santa Fé in June?"

"Vel, I do' no; vas he a big fellow? Maybe de von vat vas killed — hey?"

"Yes; his name was Moylan, post-sutler at Fort Marcy."

"Maybe dot vos it. Why you vant to know — hey?"

"No harm to you, Kaplan," the Sergeant explained. "Only I picked it up out there after Moylan was killed, and discovered by some writing on the flap that it originally belonged to a friend of mine. I was curious to learn how it got into your hands."

The trader shrugged his shoulders.

"Vud it be worth a drink?" he asked cannily.

"Of course. Frank, give Kaplan whatever he wants. Now, fire away."

"Vel," and the fellow filled his glass deliberately, "it vas sold me six months before by a fellow vat had a black beard —"

"Dupont?"

"Dat vos de name ov de fellar, yes. Now I know it. I saw him here again soon. You know him?"

"By sight only; he is not the original owner, nor the man I am trying to trace. You know nothing of where he got the bag, I presume?"

"I know notting more as I tell you alreatty," rather disconsolately, as he realized that one drink was all he was going to receive.

Hamlin elbowed his way out to the street. He had learned something, but not much that was of any value. Undoubtedly the haversack had come into Dupont's possession through his wife, but this knowledge yielded no information as to the present whereabouts of Le Fevre. When the latter had separated from the woman, this old army bag was left behind, and, needing money, Dupont had disposed of it, along with other truck, seemingly of little value.

The Sergeant reached this conclusion quickly, and, satisfied that any further investigation along this line would be worthless, reverted to his earlier quest — the safety of Miss McDonald. Merely to satisfy himself

of her presence, he crossed the street and glanced in at the whirling dancers. There were few loiterers at the doorway and he stood for a moment beside the guard, where he was able to survey the entire room. Mrs. Dupont was upon the floor, and swept past twice, without lifting her eyes in recognition, but neither among the dancers, nor seated, could he discover Miss Molly.

Startled at not finding her present, Hamlin searched anxiously for the Major, only to assure himself of his absence also. Could they have returned to the fort as early as this? If so, how did it happen their guest was still present, happily enjoying herself? Of course she might be there under escort of some one else — Captain Barrett, possibly. He would ask the infantryman.

"Have you seen Miss McDonald since supper?"

The soldier hesitated an instant, as though endeavoring to remember.

"No, I ain't, now you speak of it. She went out with that kid over there, and he came back alone. Don't believe he 's danced any since. The Major was here, though; Connors brought him a note a few minutes ago, and he got his hat and went out."

Hamlin drew a breath of relief. "Girl must have

sent for him to take her home," he said. "Well, it 's time for me to turn in — good-night, old man."

He tramped along the brightly illumined street, and out upon the dark road leading up the bluff to the fort, his mind occupied with the events of the evening, and those other incidents leading up to them. There was no doubt that Miss McDonald and her father had returned to their home. But what could he do to assist her? The very knowledge that she had voluntarily appealed to him, that she had come to him secretly with her trouble, brought strange happiness. Moreover his former acquaintance with Mrs. Dupont gave him a clue to the mystery. Yet how was he going to unravel the threads, discover the motive, find out the various conspirators? What were they really after? Money probably, but possibly revenge. What did the woman know which enabled her to wield such influence over McDonald? What was the trap they proposed springing? The Sergeant felt that he could solve these problems if given an opportunity, but he was handicapped by his position; he could not leave his troop, could not meet or mingle with the suspected parties; was tied, hand and foot, by army discipline. He could not even absent himself from the post without gaining special permission. He swore to himself

over the hopelessness of the situation, as he tramped through the blackness toward the guard-house. The sentinel glanced at his pass, scrutinizing it by the light of a fire, and thrust the paper into his pocket. Hamlin advanced, and at the corner saluted the officer of the day, who had just stepped out of the guard-house door.

"Good evening, Sergeant," the latter said genially. "Just in from town? I expect they are having some dance down there to-night."

"Yes, sir," hesitatingly, and then venturing the inquiry. "May I ask if Major McDonald has returned to the post?"

"McDonald? No," he glanced at his watch. "He had orders to go east to Ripley on the stage. That was due out about an hour ago."

"To Ripley? By stage?" the Sergeant repeated the words, dazed. "Why — why, what has become of Miss McDonald?"

The officer smiled, shaking his head.

"I 'm sure I don't know, my man," he returned carelessly. "Come back with Barrett and his lady-love, likely. Why?" suddenly interested by the expression on the other's face. "What 's happened? Is there anything wrong?"

CHAPTER XXII

A DEEPENING MYSTERY

STARTLED and bewildered as Hamlin was by this sudden revealment, he at once comprehended the embarrassment of his own position. He could not confess all he knew, certainly not the fact that the girl had met him secretly and had vanished while he was endeavoring to turn aside Mrs. Dupont. He must protect her at all hazards. To gain time, and self-control, he replied with a question:

"Did not Connors drive them down, sir?"

"Yes, the four of them."

"And Major McDonald knew then that he was ordered East?"

"No, the order came by telegram later. An orderly was sent down about ten o'clock. But, see here, Sergeant, I am no Bureau of Information. If you have anything to report, make it brief."

Hamlin glanced at the face of the other. He knew little about him, except that he had the reputation of being a capable officer.

"I will, sir," he responded quickly; "you may never have heard of the affair, but I was with Miss McDonald during a little Indian trouble out on the trail a few months ago."

The officer nodded.

"I heard about that; Gaskins brought her in."

"Well, ever since she has seemed grateful and friendly. You know how some women are; well, she is that kind. To-night she came to me, because she did n't seem to know whom else to go to, and told me of some trouble she was having. I realize, Captain Kane, that it may seem a bit strange to you that a young lady like Miss McDonald, an officer's daughter, would turn for help to an enlisted man, but I am telling you only the truth, sir. You see, she got it into her head somehow that I was square, and — and, well, that I cared enough to help her."

"Wait a minute, Sergeant," broke in Kane, kindly, realizing the other's embarrassment, and resting one hand on his sleeve. "You do not need to apologize for Miss McDonald. I know something of what is going on at this post, although, damn me if I 've ever got on to the straight facts. You mean that Dupont woman?"

" Yes, she 's concerned in the matter, but there are others also."

" Why could n't the girl tell her father? "

" That is where the main trouble lies, Captain. Major McDonald seems to be completely under the control of Mrs. Dupont. He is apparently afraid of her for some reason. That is what Miss Molly spoke to me about. We were on the side porch at the hotel talking while the dancers were at supper — it was the only opportunity the girl had to get away — and Mrs. Dupont and her husband came into the parlor —"

" Her husband? Good Lord, I thought her husband was dead."

" He is n't. He 's a tin-horn gambler, known in the saloons as ' Reb,' a big duffer, wearing a black beard."

" All right, go on; I don't know him."

" Well, I stepped into the room to keep the two apart, leaving the girl alone outside. We had a bit of talk before I got the room cleared, and when I went back to the porch, Miss Molly had gone."

" Dropped over the railing to the ground."

" That 's what I thought at the time, sir, but what happened to her after that? She did n't return to the hotel; she was not at the dance hall, and has n't come back to the post."

"The hell you say! Are you sure?"

"I am; I searched for her high and low before I left, and she could not get in here without passing the guard-house."

Kane stared into the Sergeant's face a moment, and then out across the parade ground. A yellow light winked in the Colonel's office, occasionally blotted out by the passing figure of a sentry. The officer came to a prompt decision.

"The 'old man' is over there yet, grubbing at some papers. Come on over, and tell him what you have told me. I believe the lass will turn up all right, but it does look rather queer."

The Colonel and the Post Adjutant were in the little office, busy over a pile of papers. Both officers glanced up, resenting the interruption, as Kane entered, Hamlin following. The former explained the situation briefly, while the commandant leaned back in his chair, his keen eyes studying the younger man.

"Very well, Captain Kane," he said shortly, as the officer's story ended. "We shall have to examine into this, of course, but will probably discover the whole affair a false alarm. There is, at present, no necessity for alarming any others. Sergeant, kindly

explain to me why Miss McDonald should have come to you in her distress?"

Hamlin stepped forward, and told the story again in detail, answering the Colonel's questions frankly.

"This, then, was the only time you have met since your arrival?"

"Yes, sir."

"And this Mrs. Dupont? You have had a previous acquaintance with her?"

"Some years ago."

"You consider her a dangerous woman?"

"I know her to be utterly unscrupulous, sir. I am prepared to state that she is here under false pretences, claiming to be a niece of Major McDonald's. I do not know her real purpose, but am convinced it is an evil one."

The Colonel shook his head doubtfully, glancing at the silent adjutant.

"That remains to be proven, Sergeant. I have, of course, met the lady, and found her pleasant and agreeable as a companion. Deuced pretty too; hey, Benson? Why do you say she masquerades as McDonald's niece?"

"Because her maiden name was Carson and the Major's sister married a man named Counts."

"There might have been another marriage. Surely McDonald must know."

"Miss Molly says not, Colonel. He has known nothing of his sister for over twenty years, and accepted this woman on her word."

"Well, well! Interesting situation; hey, Benson? Like to get to the bottom myself. Damme if it don't sound like a novel. However, the thing before us right now is to discover what has become of Miss McDonald." He straightened up in his chair, then leaned across the table. "Captain Kane, make a thorough examination of McDonald's quarters first. If the girl is not found there, detail two men to accompany Sergeant Hamlin on a search of the town."

"Very well, sir; come on, Sergeant."

"Just a moment — if we find the trail leads beyond the town are we authorized to continue?"

"Certainly, yes. Adjutant, write out the order. Anything more?"

"I should prefer two men of my own troop, sir, mounted."

"Very well; see to it, Captain."

The two men walked down past the dark row of officers' houses, the Sergeant a step to the rear on the narrow cinder path. McDonald's quarters were as

black as the others, and there was no response from within when Kane rapped at the door. They tried the rear entrance with the same result — the place was plainly unoccupied.

"Pick out your men, Hamlin," the Captain said sternly, "and I 'll call the stable guard."

Ten minutes later, fully equipped for field service, the three troopers circled the guard-house and rode rapidly down the dark road toward the yellow lights of the town. The Sergeant explained briefly the cause of the expedition, and the two troopers, experienced soldiers, asked no unnecessary questions. Side by side the three men rode silently into the town, and Hamlin swung down from his saddle at the door of the dance hall. With a word to the guard he crossed the floor to intercept Mrs. Dupont. The latter regarded his approach with astonishment, her hand on Captain Barrett's blue sleeve.

"Certainly not," she replied rather sharply to his first question. "I am not in charge of Miss McDonald. She is no doubt amusing herself somewhere; possibly lying down over at the hotel; she complained of a headache earlier in the evening. Why do you come to me?"

"Yes," broke in the Captain, "that is what I wish

to know, Hamlin. By what authority are you here?"

"The orders of the Colonel commanding, sir," respectfully, yet not permitting his glance to leave the woman's face. "You insist then, madam, that you know nothing of the girl's disappearance?"

"No!" defiantly, her cheeks red.

"Nor of what has become of Connors, or your ranch manager?"

She shrugged her shoulders, endeavoring to smile.

"The parties mentioned are of very small interest to me."

"And Major McDonald," he insisted, utterly ignoring the increasing anger of the officer beside her. "Possibly you were aware of his departure?"

"Yes," more deliberately; "he told me of his orders, and bade me good-bye later. So far as Connors is concerned, he was to have the carriage here for us at two o'clock. Is that all, Mr. Sergeant Hamlin?"

"You better make it all," threatened the Captain belligerently, "before I lose my temper at this infernal impertinence."

Hamlin surveyed the two calmly, confident that the woman knew more than she would tell, and utterly indifferent as to the other.

"Very well," he said quietly, "I will learn what I desire elsewhere. I shall find Miss McDonald, and discover what has actually occurred."

"My best wishes, I am sure," and the lady patted the Captain's arm gently. "We are losing this waltz."

There was but one course for Hamlin to pursue. He had no trail to follow, only a vague suspicion that these plotters were in some way concerned in the mysterious disappearance. Thus far, however, they had left behind no clue to their participation. Moreover he was seriously handicapped by ignorance of any motive. Why should they desire to gain possession of the girl? It could not be money, or the hope of ransom. What then? Was it some accident which had involved her in the toils prepared for another? If so, were those unexpected orders for Major McDonald a part of the conspiracy, or had their receipt complicated the affair? The Sergeant was a soldier, not a detective, and could only follow a straight road in his investigation. He must circle widely until he found some trail to follow as patiently as an Indian. There would be tracks left somewhere, if he could only discover them. If this was a hasty occurrence, in any way an accident, something was sure to be left

uncovered, some slip reveal the method. He would trace the movements of the father first, and then search the saloons and gambling dens for the two men. Though unsuccessful with Mrs. Dupont, he knew how to deal with such as they.

The stage agent was routed out of bed and came to the door, revolver in hand, startled and angry.

"Who?" he repeated. "Major McDonald? How the hell should I know? Some officer went out — yes; heavy set man with a mustache. I didn't pay any attention to him; had government transportation. There were two other passengers, both men, ranchers, I reckon; none in the station at all. What 's that, Jane?"

A woman's voice spoke from out the darkness behind.

"Was the soldier asking if Major McDonald went East on the coach, Sam?"

"Sure; what do you know about it?"

"Why, I was outside when they started," she explained, "and the man in uniform was n't the Major. "I know him by sight, for he 's been down here a dozen times when I was at the desk. This fellow was about his size, but dark and stoop-shouldered."

"And the others?" asked Hamlin eagerly.

"I did n't know either of them, only I noticed one had a black beard."

"A very large, burly fellow?"

"No, I don't think so. I did n't pay special attention to any of them, only to wonder who the officer was, 'cause I never remembered seein' him here before at Dodge, but, as I recollect, the fellow with a beard was rather undersized; had a shaggy buffalo-skin cap on."

Plainly enough the man was not Dupont, and McDonald had not departed on the stage, while some other, pretending to be he, possibly wearing his clothes to further the deceit, had taken the seat reserved in the coach. Baffled, bewildered by this unexpected discovery, the Sergeant swung back into his saddle, not knowing which way to turn.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DEAD BODY

THAT both McDonald and his daughter were involved in this strange puzzle was already clear. The disappearance of the one was as mysterious as that of the other. Whether the original conspiracy had centred about the Major, and Miss Molly had merely been drawn into the net through accident, or whether both were destined as victims from the first, could not be determined by theory. Indeed the Sergeant could evolve no theory, could discover no purpose in the outrage. Convinced that Dupont and his wife were the moving spirits, he yet possessed no satisfactory reason for charging them with the crime, for which there was no apparent object.

Nothing remained to be done but search the town, a blind search in the hope of uncovering some trail. That crime had been committed — either murder or abduction — was evident; the two had not dropped thus suddenly out of sight without cause. Nor did it seem possible they could have been whisked away

without leaving some trace behind. The town was accustomed to murder and sudden death; the echo of a revolver shot would create no panic, awaken no alarm, and yet the place was small, and there was little likelihood that any deed of violence would pass long unnoticed. With a few words of instruction, and hasty descriptions of both Dupont and Connors, Hamlin sent his men down the straggling street to drag out the occupants of shack and tent, riding himself to the blazing front of the " Poodle Dog."

Late as the hour was, the saloon and the gambling rooms above were all crowded. Hamlin plunged into the mass of men, pressing passage back and forth, his eyes searching the faces, while he eagerly questioned those with whom he had any acquaintance. Few among these could recall to mind either " Reb " or his boon companion, and even those who did retained no recollection of having seen the two lately. The bartenders asserted that neither man had been there that night, and the dealers above were equally positive. The city marshal, encountered outside, remembered Dupont, and had seen him at the hotel three hours before, but was positive the fellow had not been on the streets since. Connors he did not know, but if the man was Major McDonald's driver, then he was

missing all right, for Captain Barrett had had to employ a livery-man to drive Mrs. Dupont back to the fort. No, there was no other lady with her; he was sure, for he had watched them get into the carriage.

The two troopers were no more fortunate in their results, but had succeeded in stirring up greater excitement during their exploration, several irate individuals, roughly aroused from sleep, exhibiting fighting propensities, which had cost one a blackened eye, and the other the loss of a tooth. Both, however, had enjoyed the occasion, and appeared anxious for more. Having exhausted the possibilities of the town, the soldiers procured lanterns, and, leaving the horses behind, began exploring the prairie. In this labor they were assisted by the marshal, and a few aroused citizens hastily impressed into a posse. The search was a thorough one, but the ground nearby was so cut up by hoofs and wheels as to yield no definite results. Hamlin, obsessed with the belief that whatever had occurred had been engineered by Dupont, and recalling the fact that the man was once a ranchman somewhere to the southward, jumped to the conclusion that the fellow would naturally head in that direction, seeking familiar country in which to hide. With the two troopers he pushed on toward the river, choosing the upper

ford as being the most likely choice of the fugitives. The trampled mud of the north bank exhibited fresh tracks, but none he could positively identify. However, a party on horseback had crossed within a few hours, and, without hesitation, he waded out into the stream.

The gray of dawn was in the sky as the three troopers, soaked to the waist, crept up the south bank and studied the trail. Behind them the yellow lanterns still bobbed about between the river and town, but there was already sufficient light to make visible the signs underfoot. Horsemen had climbed the bank, the hoof marks yet damp where water had drained from dripping fetlocks, and had instantly broken into a lope. A moment's glance proved this to Hamlin as he crept back and forth, scrutinizing each hoof mark intently.

"Five in the party," he said soberly. "Three mustangs and two American horses, cavalry shod. About three hours ahead of us." He straightened up, his glance peering into the gray mists. "I reckon it 's likely our outfit, but we 'll never catch them on foot. They 'll be behind the sand-dunes before this. Before we go back, boys, we 'll see if they left the trail where it turns west."

The three ran forward, paying little heed until they reached the edge of the ravine. Here the beaten trail swerved sharply to the right. Fifty feet beyond, the marks of horses' hoofs appeared on the sloping bank, and Hamlin sprang down to where the marks disappeared around the edge of a large bowlder. His hand on the stone, he stopped suddenly with quick indrawing of breath, staring down at a motionless figure lying almost at his feet. The man, roughly dressed, lay on his face, a bullet wound showing above one ear, the back of his neck caked with blood. The Sergeant, mastering his first sense of horror, turned him over and gazed upon the ghastly face of Major McDonald.

"My God, they've murdered him here!" he exclaimed. "Shot him down from behind. Look, men. No; stand back, and don't muss up the tracks. There are foot-prints here — Indians, by heaven! Three of them Indians!"

"Some plainsmen wear moccasins."

"They don't walk that way — toes in; and see this hair in McDonald's fingers — that's Indian, sure. Here is where a horse fell, and slid down the bank. Isn't that a bit of broken feather caught in the bush, Carroll? Bring it over here."

The three bent over the object.

"Well, what do you say? You men are both plainsmen."

"Cheyenne," returned Carroll promptly. "But what the hell are they doing here?"

Hamlin shook his head.

"It will require more than guessing to determine that," he said sternly. "And there is only one way to find out. That fellow was a Cheyenne all right, and there were three of them and two whites in the party — see here; the prints of five horses ridden, and one animal led. That will be the one McDonald had. They went straight up the opposite bank of the ravine. If they leave a trail like that we can ride after them full speed."

Carroll had been bending over the dead officer and now glanced up.

"There 's sand just below, Sergeant," he said. "That 's why they are so darn reckless here."

"Of course; they 'll hide in the dunes, and the sooner we 're after them the better. Wade, you remain with the body; Carroll and I will return to the fort and report. We 'll have to have more men — Wasson if I can get him — and equipment for a hard ride. Come on, Jack."

They waded the river, and ran through the town,

shouting their discovery to the marshal and his posse as they passed. Twenty minutes later Hamlin stood before the Colonel, hastily telling the story. The latter listened intently, gripping the arms of his chair.

"Shot from behind, hey?" he ejaculated, "and his clothing stolen. Looks like a carefully planned affair, Sergeant; sending that fellow through to Ripley was expected to throw us off the track. That 's why they were so careless covering their trail; expected to have several days' start. It is my notion they never intended to kill him; had a row of some kind, or else Mac tried to get away. Any trace of the girl?"

"No; but she must have been there."

"So I think; got mixed up in the affair some way, and they have been compelled to carry her off to save themselves. Do you know why they were after Mac?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I do; he carried thirty thousand dollars."

"What?"

"He was acting paymaster. The money came in from Wallace last evening, and he was ordered to take it to Ripley at once."

Hamlin drew in his breath quickly in surprise.

"Who knew about that, sir?"

"No one but the Adjutant, and Major McDonald — not even the orderly."

The eyes of officer and soldier met.

"Do you suppose he could have told *her?*" the former asked in sudden suspicion.

"That would be my theory, sir. But it is useless to speculate. We have no proof, no means of forcing her to confess. The only thing for us to do is to trail those fugitives. I need another man — a scout — Wasson, if he can be spared — and rations for three days."

The Colonel hesitated an instant, and then rose, placing a hand on Hamlin's arm.

"I 'll do it for Miss McDonald, but not for the money," he said slowly. "I expect orders every hour for your troop, and Wasson is detailed for special service. But damn it, I 'll take the responsibility — go on, and run those devils down."

Hamlin turned to the door; then wheeled about.

"You know this man Dupont, Colonel?"

"Only by sight."

"Any idea where he used to run cattle?"

"Wait a minute until I think. I heard McDonald telling about him one night at the club, something Mrs. Dupont had let slip, but I did n't pay much attention

at the time. Seems to me, though, it was down on the Canadian. No, I have it now — Buffalo Creek; runs into the Canadian. Know such a stream?"

"I 've heard of it; in west of the North Fork somewhere."

"You think it was Dupont, then?"

"I have n't a doubt that he is in the affair, and that the outfit is headed for that section. I don't know, sir, where those Indians came from, or how they happened to be up here, but I believe they belong to Black Kettle's band of Cheyennes. His bunch is down below the Canadian, is it not, sir?"

"Yes."

"Dupont must be friendly with them, and this *coup* has been planned for some time. Last night was the chance they have been waiting for. The only mistake in their plans has been the early discovery because of Miss Molly's disappearance. They have gone away careless, expecting two or three days' start, and they will only have a few hours. We 'll run them down, with good luck, before they cross the Cimarron. You have no further instructions, sir?"

"No, nothing, Sergeant. You 're an old hand, and know your business, and there is no better scout on the plains than Sam Wasson. Good-bye, and good luck."

CHAPTER XXIV

IN PURSUIT

THE four men, heavily armed, and equipped for winter service, rode up the bank of the ravine to the irregularity of plain beyond. The trail, leading directly south into the solitudes, was easily followed, and Wasson, slightly in advance of the others, made no attempt to check his horse, content to lean forward, his keen eyes marking every sign. Scarcely a word was exchanged, since Hamlin had explained what had occurred as they crossed the river. Hardly less interested than the Sergeant, the sober-faced scout concentrated every energy on the pursuit, both men realizing the necessity of haste. Not only would the trail be difficult to follow after they attained the sand belt, but, if snow fell, would be utterly blotted out. And the dull, murky sky threatened snow, the sharp wind having already veered to the northwest. All about stretched a dull, dead picture of desolation, a dun-colored plain, unrelieved by vegetation, matching the skies above, extending in every direction through

weary leagues of dismal loneliness. The searching eye caught no relief from desolate sameness, drear monotony. Nowhere was there movement, or any semblance of life. Behind, the land was broken by ravines, but in every other direction it stretched level to the horizon, except that far off southward arose irregular ridges of sand, barren, ugly blotches, colorless, and forever changing formation under the beating of a ceaseless wind. It was desert, across which not even a snake crawled, and no wing of migrating bird beat the leaden sky above.

The marks of their horses' hoofs cutting sharply into the soil, told accurately the fugitives' rate of progress, and the pursuers swept forward with caution, anxious to spare their mounts and to keep out of vision themselves until nightfall. Their success depended largely on surprise, and the confidence of those ahead that they were unpursued. Wasson expressed the situation exactly, as the four halted a moment at an unexpectedly-discovered water-hole.

" I 'd think this yere plain trail was some Injun trick, boys, if I did n't know the reason fur it. 'T ain't Injun nature, but thar 's a white man ahead o' that outfit, an' he 's cock-sure that nobody 's chasin' him yet. He 's figurin' on two or three days' get-a-way, and so

don't care a tinker's dam 'bout these yere marks. Once in the sand, an' thar won't be no trail anyhow. It 's some kintry out thar, an' it would be like huntin' a needle in a haystack to try an' find them fellars after ter-night. This is my idea — we 'll just mosey along slow, savin' the hosses an' keeping back out o' sight till dark. Them fellars ain't many hours ahead, an' are likely ter make camp furst part o' ther night anyhow. They 'll feel safe onct hid in them sand-hills, an' if they don't git no sight of us, most likely they won't even post no guard. Thet 's when we want ter dig in the spurs. Ain't that about the right program, Sergeant?"

Burning with impatience as Hamlin was, fearful that every additional moment of delay might increase the girl's danger, he was yet soldier and plainsman enough to realize the wisdom of the old scout. There were at least four men in the party pursued, two of them Indian warriors, the two whites, desperate characters. Without doubt they would put up a fierce fight, or, if warned in time, could easily scatter and disappear.

"Of course you are right, Sam," he replied promptly. "Only I am so afraid of what may happen to Miss Molly."

"Forget it. Thar 's nuthin' goin' ter happen to

her while the bunch is on the move. If that outfit was all Injun, or all white, maybe thar might. But the way it is they 'll never agree on nuthin', 'cept how to git away. 'T ain't likely they ever meant ter kill the Major, 'er take the girl erlong. Them things just naturally happened, an' now they 're scared stiff. It 'll take a day er two for 'em to make up their minds what to do."

"What do you imagine they will decide, Sam?"

"Wall, thet 's all guesswork. But I reckon I know what I 'd do if I was in thet sort o' fix an' bein' chased fer murder an' robbery. I 'd take the easy way; make fer the nearest Injun village, an' leave the girl thar."

"You mean Black Kettle's camp?"

"I reckon; he 's down thar on the Canadian somewhar. You kin bet those fellars know whar, an' thet 's whut they 're aimin' for, unless this yere Dupont has some hidin' out scheme of his own. Whar did you say he ranched?"

"Buffalo Creek."

"Thet 's the same neighborhood; must 've been in cahoots with those red devils to have ever run cattle in thar. We 've got to head 'em off afore they git down into that kintry, er we won't have no scalps to go back home with. Let 's mosey erlong, boys."

The day grew dark and murky as they moved steadily forward, the wind blew cold from out the northwest, the heavy canopy of cloud settled lower in a frosty fog, which gradually obscured the landscape. This mist became so thick that the men could scarcely see a hundred yards in any direction, and Hamlin placed a pocket compass on his saddle-pommel. The trail was less distinct as they traversed a wide streak of alkali, but what few signs remained convinced Wasson that the fugitives were still together, and riding southward. Under concealment of the fog his previous caution relaxed, and he led the way at a steady trot, only occasionally drawing rein to make certain there was no division of the party ahead. The alkali powdered them from head to foot, clinging to the horses' hides, reddening and blinding the eyes, poisoning the lips dry and parched with thirst. The two troopers swore grimly, but the Sergeant and scout rode in silence, bent low over their pommels, eyes strained into the mist ahead. It was not yet dark when they rode in between the first sand-dunes, and Wasson, pulling his horse up short, checked the others with uplifted hand.

"Thar 'll be a camp here soon," he said, swinging down from the saddle, and studying the ground.

"The wind has 'bout blotted it all out, but you kin see yere back o' this ridge whar they turned in, an' they was walkin' their horses. Gittin' pretty tired, I reckon. We might as well stop yere too, Sergeant, an' eat some cold grub. You two men spread her out, an' rub down the hosses, while Hamlin an' I poke about a bit. Better find out all we kin, 'Brick,' 'fore it gits dark."

He started forward on the faint trail, his rifle in the hollow of his arm, and the Sergeant ranged up beside him. The sand was to their ankles, and off the ridge summit the wind whirled the sharp grit into their faces.

"What 's comin', Sam; a storm?"

"Snow," answered the scout shortly, "a blizzard of it, er I lose my guess. 'Fore midnight yer won't be able ter see yer hand afore yer face. I 've ben out yere in them things afore, an' they 're sure hell. If we don't git sight o' thet outfit mighty soon, 't ain't likely we ever will. I 've been expectin' that wind to shift nor'east all day — then we 'll get it." He got down on his knees, endeavoring to decipher some faint marks on the sand. "Two of 'em dismounted yere, an Injun an' a white — a big feller by his hoof prints — an' they went on leadin' their hosses. Goin' into

camp, I reckon — sure, here 's the spot now. Well, I 'll be damned! "

Both men stood staring — under protection of a sand ridge was a little blackened space where some mesquite chips had been burned, and all about it freshly trampled sand, and slight impressions where men had outstretched themselves. Almost at Wasson's feet fluttered a pink ribbon, and beyond the fire circle lay the body of a man, face up to the sky. It was Connors, a ghastly bullet hole between his eyes, one cheek caked black with blood. The Sergeant sprang across, and bent over the motionless form.

" Pockets turned inside out," he said, glancing back. " The poor devil! "

" Had quite a row here," returned the scout. " That stain over thar is blood, an' it never come from him, fer he died whar he fell. Most likely he shot furst, er used a knife. The girl 's with 'em anyhow; I reckon this yere was her ribbon; that footprint is sure."

He stirred up the scattered ashes, and then passed over and looked at the dead man.

" What do yer think, Sergeant? "

" They stopped here to eat, maybe five hours ago," pushing the ashes about with his toe. " The fire has

been out that long. Then they got into a quarrel — Connors and Dupont — for he was shot with a Colt '45'; no Indian ever did that. Then they struck out again with two led horses. I should say they were three or four hours ahead, travelling slow."

"Good enough," and Wasson patted his arm. "You 're a plainsman all right, 'Brick.' You kin sure read signs. Thet 's just 'bout the whole story, as I make it. Nuthin' fer us to do but snatch a bite an' go on. Our hosses 're fresher 'n theirs. No sense our stoppin' to bury Connors; he ain't worth it, an' the birds 'll take care o' him. The outfit was still a headin' south — see!"

There could be no doubt of this, as the shelter of the sand ridge had preserved a plain trail, although a few yards beyond, the sweeping wind had already almost obliterated every sign of passage. The four men ate heartily of their cold provender, discussing the situation in a few brief sentences. Wasson argued that Dupont was heading for some Indian winter encampment, thinking to shift responsibility for the crime upon the savages, thus permitting him to return once more to civilization, but Hamlin clung to his original theory of a hide-out upon Dupont's old cattle-range, and that a purpose other than the mere robbery

of McDonald was in view. All alike, however, were convinced that the fugitives were seeking the wild bluffs of the Canadian River for concealment.

It was not yet dark when they again picked up the trail, rode around the dead body of Connors, and pushed forward into the maze of sand. For an hour the advance was without incident, the scout in the lead not even dismounting, his keen eyes picking up the faint "sign" unerringly. Then darkness shut down, the lowering bank of clouds completely blotting the stars, although the white glisten of the sand under foot yielded a slight guidance. Up to this time there had been no deviation in direction, and now when the trail could be no longer distinguished, the little party decided on riding straight southward until they struck the Cimarron. An hour or two later the moon arose, hardly visible and yet brightening the cloud canopy, so that the riders could see each other and proceed more rapidly. Suddenly Wasson lifted his hand, and turned his face up to the sky.

"Snow," he announced soberly. "Thought I felt it afore, and the wind 's changed."

Hamlin turned in the saddle, feeling already the sharp sting of snow pellets on his face. Before he could even answer the air was full of whiteness, a

fierce gust of wind hurling the flying particles against them. In another instant they were in the very heart of the storm, almost hurled forward by the force of the wind, and blinded by the icy deluge. The pelting of the hail startled the horses, and in spite of every effort of the riders, they drifted to the right, tails to the storm. The swift change was magical. The sharp particles of icy snow seemed to swirl upon them from every direction, sucking their very breath, bewildering them, robbing them of all sense of direction. Within two minutes the men found it impossible to penetrate the wintry shroud except for a few feet ahead of them.

The Sergeant knew what it meant, for he had had experience of these plains storms before.

"Halt!" he cried, his voice barely audible in the blast. "Close up, men; come here to me — lively now? That you, Wade? Wasson; oh, all right, Sam. Here, pass that lariat back; now get a grip on it, every one of you, and hold to it for your lives. Let me take the lead, Sam; we 'll have to run by compass. Now then, are you ready?"

The lariat rope, tied to Hamlin's pommel, straightened out and was grasped desperately by the gloved hands of the men behind. The Sergeant, shading his

eyes, half smothered in the blast, could see merely ill-defined shadows.

"All caught?"

The answers were inaudible.

"For the Lord's sake, speak up; answer now — Wasson."

"Here."

"Wade."

"Here."

"Carroll."

"Here."

"Good; now come on after me."

He drove his horse forward, head bent low over the compass, one arm flung up across his mouth to prevent inhaling the icy air. He felt the tug of the line; heard the labored breathing of the next horse behind, but saw nothing except that wall of swirling snow pellets hurled against him by a pitiless wind, fairly lacerating the flesh. It was freezing cold; already he felt numb, exhausted, heavy-eyed. The air seemed to penetrate his clothing, and prick the skin as with a thousand needles. The thought came that if he remained in the saddle he would freeze stiff. Again he turned, and sent the voice of command down the struggling line:

"Dismount; wind the rope around your pommels. Sam. How far is it to the Cimarron?"

"More 'n twenty miles."

"All right! We 've got to make it, boys," forcing a note of cheerfulness into his voice. "Hang on to the bit even if you drop. I may drift to the west, but that won't lose us much. Come on, now."

"Hamlin, let me break trail."

"We 'll take it turn about, Sam. It 'll be worse in an hour than it is now. All ready, boys."

Blinded by the sleet, staggering to the fierce pummelling of the wind, yet clinging desperately to his horse's bit, the Sergeant struggled forward in the swirl of the storm.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE BLIZZARD

THERE was no cessation, no abatement. Across a thousand miles of plain the ice-laden wind swept down upon them with the relentless fury of a hurricane, driving the snow crystals into their faces, buffeting them mercilessly, numbing their bodies, and blinding their eyes. In that awful grip they looked upon Death, but struggled on, as real men must until they fall. Breathing was agony; every step became a torture; fingers grasping the horses' bits grew stiff and deadened by frost; they reeled like drunken men, sightless in the mad swirl, deafened by the pounding of the blast against their ears. All consciousness left them; only dumb instinct kept them battling for life, staggering forward, foot by foot, odd phantasies of imagination beginning to beckon. In their weakness, delirium gripped their half-mad brains, yielding new strength to fight the snow fiend. Aching in every joint, trembling from fatigue, they dare not rest an instant. The wind, veering more to the east, lashed

their faces like a whip. They crouched behind the horses to keep out of the sting of it, crunching the snow, now in deep drifts, under their half-frozen feet.

Wade, a young fellow not overly strong, fell twice. They placed him in the centre, with Carroll bringing up the rear. Again he went down, face buried in the snow, crying like a babe. Desperately the others lashed him into his saddle, binding a blanket about him, and went grimly staggering on, his limp figure rocking above them. Hour succeeded hour in ceaseless struggle; no one knew where they were, only the leader staggered on, his eyes upon the compass. Wasson and Hamlin took their turns tramping a trail, the snow often to their knees. They had stopped speaking, stopped thinking even. All their movements became automatic, instinctive, the result of iron discipline. They realized the only hope—attainment of the Cimarron bluffs. There was no shelter there in the open, to either man or horse; the sole choice left was to struggle on, or lie down and die. The last was likely to be the end of it, but while a drop of blood ran red and warm in their veins they would keep their feet and fight.

Carroll's horse stumbled and rolled, catching the numbed trooper under his weight. The jerk on the

lariat flung Wade out of the saddle, dangling head downward. With stiffened fingers, scarcely comprehending what they were about, the Sergeant and Wasson came to the rescue, helped the frightened horse struggle to its feet, and, totally blinded by the fury of the storm which now beat fairly in their eyes, grasped the dangling body, swaying back and forth as the startled animal plunged in terror. It was a corpse they gripped, already stiff with cold, the eyes wide-open and staring. Carroll, bruised and limping, came to their help, groaning with pain, and the three men together managed to lift the dead weight to the horse's back, and to bind it safely with the turn of a rope. Then, breathless from exhaustion, crouching behind the animals, bunched helplessly together, the howl of the wind like the scream of lost souls, the three men looked into each other's faces.

"I reckon Jim died without ever knowin' it," said the scout, breaking again the film of ice over his eyes, and thrashing his arms. "I allers heard tell it was an easy way o' goin'. Looks to me he was better off than we are just now. Hurt much, Carroll?"

"Crunched my leg mighty bad; can't bear no weight on it. 'T was darn near froze stiff before; thet 's why I could n't get out o' the way quick."

"Sure; well, ye 'll have ter ride, then. We 'll take the blanket off Jim; he won't need it no more. 'Brick' an' I kin hoof it yet awhile — hey, 'Brick'?"

Hamlin lifted his head from the shelter of his horse's mane.

"I reckon I can make my feet move," he asserted doubtfully, "but they don't feel as though there was any life left in them." He stamped on the snow. "How long do these blizzards generally last, Sam?"

"Blow themselves out in about three days."

"Three days? God! We can never live it out here."

His eyes ranged over the dim outline of Wade stretched across the saddle, powdered with snow, rested an instant upon Carroll who had sunk back upon the ground, nursing his injured limb, and then sought the face of Wasson.

"What the hell can we do?"

"Go on; thet 's all of it; go on till we drop, lad. Come, 'Brick,' my boy," and the scout gripped the Sergeant's shoulder, "you 're not the kind to lie down. We 've been in worse boxes than this and pulled out. It 's up to you and me to make good. Let 's crunch some hard-tack and go on, afore the whole three of us freeze stiff."

The Sergeant thrust out his hand.

"That is n't what 's taken the nerve out of me, Sam," he said soberly. "It 's thinking of the girl out in all this with those devils."

"Likely as not she ain't," returned the other, tramping the snow under his feet. "I 've been thinkin' 'bout thet too. Thet outfit must hev had six hours the start o' us, did n't they?"

Hamlin nodded.

"Well, then, they could n't a ben far from the Cimarron when the storm come. They 'd be safe enough under the bluffs; have wood fer a fire, and lay thar mighty comfortable. That 's whar them bucks are, all right. Why, damn it, man, we 've got to get through. 'T ain't just our fool lives that 's at stake. Brace up!"

"How far have we come?"

"A good ten miles, an' the compass has kep' us straight."

They drew in closer together, and munched a hard cracker apiece, occasionally exchanging a muttered word or two, thrashing their limbs about to keep up circulation, and dampening their lips with snow. They were but dim, spectral shapes in the darkness, the air filled with crystal pellets, swept about by a merciless

wind, the horses standing tails to the storm and heads drooping. In spite of the light refraction of the snow the eyes could scarcely see two yards away through the smother. Above, about, the ceaseless wind howled, its icy breath chilling to the bone. Carroll clambered stiffly into his saddle, crying and swearing from weakness and pain. The others, stumbling about in the deep snow, which had drifted around them during the brief halt, stripped the blanket from Wade's dead body, and tucked it in about Carroll as best they could.

"Now keep kicking and thrashing around, George," ordered the Sergeant sternly. "For God's sake, don't go to sleep, or you 'll be where Jim is. We 'll haul you out of this, old man. Sam, you take the rear, and hit Carroll a whack every few minutes; I'll break trail. Forward! now."

They plunged into it, ploughing a way through the drifts, the reluctant horses dragging back at first, and drifting before the fierce sweep of the wind, in spite of every effort at guidance. It was an awful journey, every step torture, but Hamlin bent to it, clinging grimly to the bit of his animal, his other arm protecting his eyes from the sting of the wind. Behind, Wasson wielded a quirt, careless whether its lash

struck the horse's flank or Carroll. And across a thousand miles of snow-covered plain, the storm howled down upon them in redoubled fury, blinding their eyes, making them stagger helplessly before its blasts.

They were still moving, now like snails, when the pale sickly dawn came, revealing inch by inch the dread desolation, stretching white and ghastly in a slowly widening circle. The exhausted, struggling men, more nearly dead than alive from their ceaseless toil, had to break the film of ice from their eyes to perceive their surroundings. Even then they saw nothing but the bare, snow-draped plain, the air full of swirling flakes. There was nothing to guide them, no mark of identification; merely lorn barrenness in the midst of which they wandered, dragging their half-frozen horses. The dead body of Wade had stiffened into grotesque shape, head and feet dangling, shrouded in clinging snow. Carroll had fallen forward across his saddle pommel, too weak to sit erect, but held by the taut blanket, and gripping his horse's ice-covered mane. Wasson was ahead now, doggedly crunching a path with his feet, and Hamlin staggered along behind.

Suddenly some awakened instinct in the numbed brain of the scout told him of a change in their sur-

roundings. He felt rather than saw the difference. They had crossed the sand belt, and the contour of the prairie was rising. Then the Cimarron was near! Even as the conviction took shape, the ghostly outline of a small elevation loomed through the murk. He stared at it scarce believing, imagining a delusion, and then sent his cracked voice back in a shout on the wind.

"We 're thar, 'Brick'! My God, lad, here 's the Cimarron!"

He wheeled about, shading his mouth, so as to make the words carry through the storm.

"Do you hear? We 're within a half mile o' the river. Stir Carroll up! Beat the life inter him! There 's shelter and fire comin'!"

As though startled by some electric shock, Hamlin sprang forward, his limbs strengthening in response to fresh hope, ploughed through the snow to Carroll's side, and shook and slapped the fellow into semi-consciousness.

"We 're at the river, George!" he cried, jerking up the dangling head. "Wake up, man! Wake up! Do you hear? We 'll have a fire in ten minutes!"

The man made a desperate effort, bracing his hands on the horse's neck and staring at his tormentor with dull, unseeing eyes.

"Oh, go to hell!" he muttered, and went down again.

Hamlin struck him twice, his chilled hand tingling to the blow, but the inert figure never moved.

"No use, Sam. We've got to get on, and thaw him out. Get up there, you pony!"

The ghostly shape of the hill was to their right, and they circled its base almost waist-deep in drift. This brought the wind directly into their faces, and the horses balked, dragging back and compelling both men to beat them into submission. Wasson was jerking at the bit, his back turned so that he could see nothing ahead, but Hamlin, lashing the rear animal with his quirt, still faced the mound, a mere dim shadow through the mists of snow. He saw the flash of yellow flame that leaped from its summit, heard the sharp report of a gun, and saw Wasson crumble up, and go down, still clinging to his horse's rein. It came so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that the single living man left scarcely realized what had happened. Yet dazed as he was, some swift impulse flung him, headlong, into the snow behind his pony, and even as he fell, his numbed fingers gripped for the revolver at his hip. The hidden marksman shot twice, evidently discerning only dim outlines at which to aim; the red

flame of discharge cut the gloom like a knife. One ball hurtled past Hamlin's head; the other found billet in Wade's horse, and the stricken creature toppled over, bearing its dead burden with him. The Sergeant ripped off his glove, found the trigger with his half-frozen fingers, and fired twice. Then, with an oath, he leaped madly to his feet, and dashed straight at the silent hill.

CHAPTER XXVI

UNSEEN DANGER

ONCE he paused, blinded by the snow, flung up his arm, and fired, imagining he saw the dim shape of a man on the ridge summit. There was no return shot, no visible movement. Reckless, mad with rage, he sprang up the wind-swept side, and reached the crest. It was deserted, except for tracks already nearly obliterated by the fierce wind. Helpless, baffled, the Sergeant stared about him into the driving flakes, his ungloved, stiffening hand gripping the cold butt of his Colt, ready for any emergency. Nothing but vacancy and silence encompassed him. At his feet the snow was still trampled; he could see where the man had kneeled to fire; where he had run down the opposite side of the hill. There had been only one — a white man from the imprint — and he had fled south, vanishing in the smother.

It required an effort for the Sergeant to recover, to realize his true position, and the meaning of this mysterious attack. He was no longer numb with cold

or staggering from weakness. The excitement had sent the hot blood pulsing through his veins; had brought back to his heart the fighting instinct. Every desire urged him forward, clamoring for revenge, but the aroused sense of a plainsman held him motionless, staring about, listening for any sound. Behind him, down there in the hollow, were huddled the horses of his outfit, scarcely distinguishable from where he stood. If he should venture farther off, he might never be able to find a way back again. Even in the gray light of dawn he could see nothing distinctly a dozen yards distant. And Wasson had the compass. This was the thought which brought him tramping back through the drifts — Wasson! Wade was dead, Carroll little better, but the scout might have been only slightly wounded. He waded through the snow to where the man lay, face downward, his hand still gripping the rein. Before Hamlin turned him over, he saw the jagged wound and knew death had been instantaneous. He stared down at the white face, already powdered with snow; then glared about into the murky distances, revolver ready for action, every nerve throbbing. God! If he ever met the murderer! Then swift reaction came, and he buried his eyes on the neck of the nearest horse, and his body

shook with half-suppressed sobs. The whole horror of it gripped him in that instant, broke his iron will, and left him weak as a child.

But the mood did not last. Little by little he gained control, stood up again in the snow, and began to think. He was a man, and must do a man's work. With an oath he forced himself to act; reloaded his revolver, thrust it back into the holster at his hip, and, with one parting glance at poor Sam, ploughed across through the drifts to Carroll. He realized now his duty, the thing he must strive to accomplish. Wade and Wasson were gone; no human effort could aid them, but Carroll lived, and might be saved. And it was for him alone now to serve Molly. The sudden comprehension of all this stung like the lash of a whip, transformed him again into a fighter, a soldier of the sort who refuses to acknowledge defeat. His eyes darkened, his lips pressed together in a straight line.

Carroll lay helpless, inert, his head hanging down against the neck of his horse. The Sergeant jerked him erect, roughly beating him into consciousness; nor did he desist until the fellow's eyes opened in a dull stare.

"I 'll pound the life out of you unless you brace up, George," he muttered. "That 's right — get

mad if you want to. It will do you good. Wait until I get that quirt; that will set your blood moving. No! Wake up! Die, nothing! See here, man, there 's the river just ahead."

He picked up his glove, undid the reins from Wasson's stiffened fingers, and urged the horses forward. Carroll lurched drunkenly in the saddle, yet retained sufficient life to cling to the pommel, and thus the outfit plunged blindly forward into the storm, leaving the dead men where they lay. There was nothing else to do; Hamlin's heart choked him as he ploughed his way past, but he had no strength to lift those heavy bodies. Every ounce of power must be conserved for the preservation of life. Little as he could see through the snow blasts there was but one means of passage, that along the narrow rift between the ridges. The snow lay deep here, but they floundered ahead, barely able to surmount the drifts, until suddenly they emerged upon an open space, sheltered somewhat by the low hills and swept clean by the wind. Directly beneath, down a wide cleft in the bank, dimly visible, appeared the welcome waters of the Cimarron. The stream was but partly frozen over, the dark current flowing in odd contrast between the banks of ice and snow.

The Sergeant halted, examining his surroundings

cautiously, expecting every instant to be fired upon by some unseen foe. The violence of the storm prevented his seeing beyond a few yards, and the whirling snow crystals blinded him as he faced the fury of the wind sweeping down the valley. Nothing met his gaze; no sound reached his ears; about him was desolation, unbroken whiteness. Apparently they were alone in all that intense dreariness of snow. The solemn loneliness of it — the dark, silently flowing river, the dun sky, the wide, white expanse of plain, the mad violence of the storm beating against him — brought to him a feeling of helplessness. He was a mere atom, struggling alone against Nature's wild mood. Then the feeling clutched him that he was not alone; that from somewhere amid those barren wastes hostile eyes watched, skulking murderers sought his life. Yet there was no sign of any presence. He could not stand there and die, nor permit Carroll to freeze in his saddle. It would be better to take a chance; perhaps the assassins had fled, believing their work accomplished; perhaps they had become confused by the storm.

Foot by foot, feeling his passage, he advanced down the gully, fairly dragging his own horse after him. Behind, held by the straining lariat, lurched the others,

the soldier swaying on the back of the last, swearing and laughing in delirium, clutching at snowflakes with his hands. At the end of the ravine, under shelter of the bank, Hamlin trampled back the snow, herding the animals close, so as to gain the warmth of their bodies. Here they were well protected from the cruel lash of the wind and the shower of snow which blew over them and drifted higher and higher in the open space beyond. Working feverishly, the blood again circulating freely through his veins, the Sergeant hastily dragged blankets from the pack, and spread them on the ground, depositing Carroll upon them. Then he set about vigorously rubbing the soldier's exposed flesh with snow. The smart of it, together with the roughness of handling, aroused the latter from lethargy, but Hamlin, ignoring his resentment, gripped the fellow with hands of iron, never ceasing his violent ministrations until his swearing ended in silence. Then he wrapped him tightly in the blankets, and stood himself erect, glowing from the exercise. Carroll glared up at him angrily out of red-rimmed eyes.

"I 'll get you for that, you big boob!" he shouted, striving to release his arms from the clinging blankets. "You wait! I 'll get you!"

"Hush up, George, and go to sleep," the other retorted, poking the shapeless body with his foot, his thoughts already elsewhere. "Don't be a fool. I 'll get a fire if I can, and something hot into you. Within an hour you 'll be a man again. Now see here —stop that! Do you hear? You lie still right where you are, Carroll, until I come back, or I 'll kick your ribs in!" He bent down menacingly, scowling into the upturned face. "Will you mind, or shall I have to hand you one?"

Carroll shrank back like a whipped child, his lips muttering something indistinguishable. The Sergeant, satisfied, turned and floundered through the drifts to the bank of the stream. He was alert and fearful, yet determined. No matter what danger of discovery might threaten, he must build a fire to save Carroll's life. The raging storm was not over with; there was no apparent cessation of violence in the blasts of the icy wind, and the snow swept about him in blinding sheets. It would continue all day, all another night, perhaps, and they could never live through without food and warmth. He realized the risk fully, his gloved hand gripping the butt of his revolver, as he stared up and down the snow-draped bluffs. He wished he had picked up Wasson's rifle. Who was it

that had shot them up, anyhow? The very mystery added to the dread. Could it have been Dupont? There was no other conception possible, yet it seemed like a miracle that they could have kept so close on the fellow's trail all night long through the storm. Yet who else would open fire at sight? Who else, indeed, would be in this God-forsaken country? And whoever it was, where had he gone? How had he disappeared so suddenly and completely? He could not be far away, that was a certainty. No plainsman would attempt to ford that icy stream, nor desert the shelter of these bluffs in face of the storm. It would be suicidal. And if Dupont and his Indians were close at hand, Miss McDonald would be with them. He had had no time in which to reason this out before, but now the swift realization of the close proximity of the girl came to him like an electric shock. Whatever the immediate danger he must thaw out Carroll, and thus be free himself.

He could look back to where the weary horses huddled beneath the bank, grouped about the man so helplessly swaddled in blankets on the ground. They were dim, pitiable objects, barely discernible through the flying scud, yet Hamlin was quick to perceive the advantage of their position — the overhanging bluff

was complete protection from any attack except along the open bank of the river. Two armed men could defend the spot against odds. And below, a hundred yards away, perhaps — it was hard to judge through that smother — the bare limbs of several stunted cottonwoods waved dismally against the gray sky. Hesitating, his eyes searching the barrenness above to where the stream bent northward and disappeared, he turned at last and tramped downward along the edge of the stream. Across stretched the level, white prairie, beaten and obscured by the storm, while to his left arose the steep, bare bluff, swept clear by the wind, revealing its ugliness through the haze of snow. Not in all the expanse was there visible a moving object nor track of any kind. He was alone, in the midst of indescribable desolation — a cold, dead, dreary landscape.

He came to the little patch of forest growth, a dozen gaunt, naked trees at the river's edge, stunted, two of them already toppling over the bank, apparently undermined by the water, threatening to fall before each blast that smote them. Hoping to discover some splinters for a fire, Hamlin kicked a clear space in the snow, yet kept his face always toward the bluff,

his eyes vigilantly searching for any skulking figure. Silent as those desert surroundings appeared, the Sergeant knew he was not alone. He had a feeling that he was being watched, spied upon; that somewhere near at hand, crouching in that solitude, the eyes of murder followed his every movement. Suddenly he straightened up, staring at the bluff nearly opposite where he stood. Was it a dream, an illusion, or was that actually the front of a cabin at the base of the bank? He could not believe it possible, nor could he be sure. If so, then it consisted merely of a room excavated in the side of the hill, the opening closed in by cottonwood logs. It in no way extended outward beyond the contour of the bank, and was so plastered with snow as to be almost indistinguishable a dozen steps away. Yet those were logs, regularly laid, beyond a doubt; he was certain he detected now the dim outlines of a door, and a smooth wooden shutter, to which the snow refused to cling, the size and shape of a small window. His heart throbbing with excitement, the Sergeant slipped in against the bluff for protection, moving cautiously closer until he convinced himself of the reality of his strange discovery by feeling the rough bark of the logs. It was

a form of habitation of some kind beyond question; apparently unoccupied, for there were no tracks in the snow without, and no smoke of a fire visible anywhere.

CHAPTER XXVII

HUGHES' STORY

HAMLIN thrust his glove into his belt, drew forth his revolver, and gripped its stock with bare hand. This odd, hidden dwelling might be deserted, a mere empty shack, but he could not disconnect it in his mind from that murderous attack made upon their little party two hours before. Why was it here in the heart of this desert? Why built with such evident intent of concealment? But for what had occurred on the plateau above, his suspicions would never have been aroused. This was already becoming a cattle country; adventurous Texans, seeking free range and abundant water, had advanced along all these prominent streams with their grazing herds of long-horns. Little by little they had gained precarious foothold on the Indian domains, slowly forcing the savages westward. The struggle had been continuous for years, and the final result inevitable. Yet this year the story had been a different one, for the united tribes had swept the invading

stockmen back, had butchered their cattle, and once again roamed these plains as masters. Hamlin knew this; he had met and talked with those driven out, and he was aware that even now Black Kettle's winter camp of hostiles was not far away. This hut might, of course, be the deserted site of some old cow camp, some outrider's shack, but — the fellow who fired on them! He was a reality — a dangerous reality — and he was hiding somewhere close at hand.

The Sergeant stole along the front to the door, listening intently for any warning sound from either without or within. Every nerve was on edge; all else forgotten except the intensity of the moment. He could perceive nothing to alarm him, no evidence of any presence inside. Slowly, noiselessly, his Colt poised for instant action, he lifted the wooden latch, and permitted the door to swing slightly ajar, yielding a glimpse within. There was light from above, flittering dimly through some crevice in the bluff, and the darker shadows were reddened by the cheery glow of a fireplace directly opposite, although where the smoke disappeared was not at first evident. Hamlin perceived these features at a glance, standing motionless. His quick eyes visioned the whole interior — a rude table and bench, a rifle leaning in one corner,

His Colt poised for instant action, he lifted the wooden latch.

a saddle and trappings hanging against the wall; a broad-brimmed hat on the floor, a pile of skins beyond. There was an appearance of neatness also, the floor swept, the table unlittered. Yet he scarcely realized these details at the time so closely was his whole attention centred on the figure of a man. The fellow occupied a stool before the fireplace, and was bending slightly forward, staring down at the red embers, unconscious of the intruder. He was a thin-chested, unkempt individual with long hair, and shaggy whiskers, both iron gray. The side of his face and neck had a sallow look, while his nose was prominent. The Sergeant surveyed him a moment, his cocked revolver covering the motionless figure, his lips set grimly. Then he stepped within, and closed the door.

At the slight sound the other leaped to his feet, overturning the stool, and whirled about swiftly, his right hand dropping to his belt.

"That will do, friend!" Hamlin's voice rang stern.

"Stand as you are — your gun is lying on the bench yonder. Rather careless of you in this country. No, I would n't risk it if I was you; this is a hair trigger."

The fellow stared helpless into the Sergeant's gray eyes.

"Who — who the hell are you?" he managed to articulate hoarsely, "a — a soldier?"

Hamlin nodded, willing enough to let the other talk.

"You 're — you 're not one o' Le Fevre's outfit?"

"Whose?"

"Gene Le Fevre — the damn skunk; you know him?"

Startled as he was, the Sergeant held himself firm, and laughed.

"I reckon there is n't any one by that name a friend o' mine," he said coolly. "So you 're free to relieve your feelings as far as I 'm concerned. Were you expecting that gent along this trail?"

"Yes, I was, an' 'twa'n't no pleasant little reception I 'lowed to give him neither. Say! Would n't yer just as soon lower thet shootin' iron? We ain't got no call to quarrel so fur as I kin see."

"Maybe not, stranger," and Hamlin leaned back against the table, lowering his weapon slightly, as he glanced watchfully about the room, "but I 'll keep the gun handy just the same until we understand each other. Anybody else in this neighborhood?"

"Not unless it 's Le Fevre, an' his outfit."

"Then I reckon you did the shooting out there a bit ago?"

The man shuffled uneasily, but the Sergeant's right hand came to a level.

"Did you?"

"I s'pose thar ain't no use o' denyin' it," reluctantly, eyeing the gun in the corner, "but I did n't mean to shoot up no outfit but Le Fevre's. So help me, I did n't! The danged snow was so thick I could n't see nohow, and I never s'posed any one was on the trail 'cept him. Thar ain't been no white man 'long yere in three months. Did n't hit none of yer, did I?"

"Yes, you did," returned Hamlin slowly, striving to hold himself in check. "You killed one of the best fellows that ever rode these plains, you sneaking coward, you. Shot him dead, with his back to you. Now, see here, it 's a throw of the dice with me whether I fill you full of lead, or let you go. I came in here intending to kill you, if you were the cur who shot us up. But I 'm willing to listen to what you have got to say. I 'm some on the fight, but plain murder don't just appeal to me. How is it? Are you ready to talk? Spit it out, man!"

"I 'll tell yer jest how it was."

"Do it my way then; answer straight what I ask you. Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Kin I sit down?"

"Yes; make it short now; all I want is facts."

The man choked a bit, turned and twisted on the stool, but was helpless to escape.

"Wal, my name is Hughes — Jed Hughes; I uster hang out round San Antone, an' hev been mostly in the cow business. The last five years Le Fevre an' I hev been grazin' cattle in between yere an' Buffalo Creek."

"Partners?"

"Wal, by God! I thought so, till just lately," his voice rising. "Anyhow, I hed a bunch o' money in on the deal, though I 'll be darned if I know just what 's become o' it. Yer see, stranger, Gene hed the inside o' this Injun business, bein' as he 's sorter a squaw man —"

"What!" interrupted the other sharply. "Do you mean he married into one of the tribes?"

"Sorter left-handed — yep; a Cheyenne woman. Little thing like that did n't faze Gene none, if he did have a white wife — a blamed good-looker she was too. She was out here onc't, three years ago, 'bout a week maybe. Course she did n't know nothin' 'bout the squaw, an' the Injuns was all huntin' down in the Wichitas. But as I wus sayin', Gene caught on to this yere Injun war last spring — I reckon ol'

Koleta, his Injun father-in-law, likely told him what wus brewin' — he 's sorter a war-chief. Anyhow he knew thet hell wus to pay, an' so we natch'ally gathered up our long-horns an' drove 'em east whar they would n't be raided. We did n't git all the critters rounded up, as we wus in a hurry, an' they wus scattered some 'cause of a hard winter. So I come back yere to round up the rest o' ther bunch."

"And brand a few outsiders."

He grinned.

"Maybe I was n't over-particular, but anyhow I got a thousand head together by the last o' June, an' hit the trail with 'em. Then hell sure broke loose. 'Fore we 'd got that bunch o' cattle twenty mile down the Cimarron we wus rounded up by a gang o' Cheyenne Injuns, headed by that ornery Koleta, and every horn of 'em drove off. Thar wa'n't no fight; the damn bucks just laughed at us, an' left us sittin' thar out on the prairie. They hogged hosses an' all."

He wiped his face, and spat into the fire, while Hamlin sat silent, gun in hand.

"I reckon now as how Le Fevre put ol' Koleta wise to that game, but I was plum innocent then," he went on regretfully. "Wall, we, — thar wus four o' us, — hoofed it east till we struck some ranchers on Cow

Crick, and got the loan o' some ponies. Then I struck out to locate the main herd. It did n't take me long, stranger, to discover thar wa'n't no herd to locate. But I struck their trail, whar Le Fevre had driven 'em up into Missouri and cashed in fer a pot o' money. Then the damn cuss just natch'ally vanished. I plugged 'bout fer two er three months hopin' ter ketch up with him, but I never did. I heerd tell o' him onc't or twice, an' caught on he was travellin' under 'nuther name — some durn French contraction — but thet 's as much as I ever did find out. Finally, up in Independence I wus so durn near broke I reckoned I 'd better put what I hed left in a grub stake, an' drift back yere. I figgered thet maybe I could pick up some o' those Injun cattle again, and maybe some mavericks, an' so start 'nuther herd. Anyhow I could lie low fer a while, believin' Le Fevre wus sure ter come back soon as he thought the coast wus clear. I knew then he an' Koleta was in cahoots an' he 'd be headin' this way after the stock. So I come down yere quiet, an' laid fer him to show up."

"What then?"

"Nuthin' much, till yisterday. I got tergether some cows, herded down river a ways, out o' sight in the bluffs, but hev hed ter keep mighty quiet ter save

my hair. Them Cheyennes are sure pisen this year, an' raisin' Cain. I never see 'em so rambunctious afore. But I hung on yere, hidin' out, cause I did n't hev nowhar else ter go. An' yisterday, just ahead o' the blizzard, a Kiowa buck drifted in yere. Slipped down the bluff, an' caught me 'fore ever I saw him. Never laid eyes on the red afore but he wus friendly 'nough, natch'ally mistakin' me fer one o' Le Fevre's herders. His name wus Black Smoke, an' he could n't talk no English worth mentionin', but we made out to understan' each other in Mex. He wus too darn hungry and tired to talk much anyhow. But I got what I wanted to know out o' him."

"Well, go on, Hughes; you are making a long story out of it."

"The rest is short 'nough. It seems he an' ol' Koleta, an' a young Cheyenne buck, had been hangin' 'round across the river from Dodge fer quite a while waitin' fer Le Fevre to pull off some sorter stunt. Maybe I did n't get just the straight o' it, but anyhow they held up a paymaster, er something like that, fer a big boodle. They expected to do it quiet like, hold the off'cer a day er so out in the desert, an' then turn him loose to howl. But them plans did n't just exactly work. The fellow's daughter was with him,

when the pinch was made, an' they hed to take her 'long too. Then the officer man got ugly, an' had to be shot, an' Le Fevre quarrelled with the other white man in the outfit, an' killed him. That left the gal on their hands, an' them all in a hell of a fix if they wus ever caught. The young Injuns wanted to kill the gal too, an' shet her mouth, but somehow Le Fevre an' Koleta would n't hear to it — said she 'd be worth more alive than dead, an' that they could hide her whar she 'd never be heard of ag'in unless her friends put up money to buy her back."

Hamlin was leaning forward, watching the speaker intently, and it seemed to him his heart had stopped beating. This story had the semblance of truth; it *was* the truth. So Dupont and Le Fevre were one and the same. He could believe this now, could perceive the resemblance, although the man had grown older, taken on flesh, and disguised himself wonderfully by growing that black beard. Yet, at the moment, he scarcely considered the man at all; his whole interest concentrated on the fate of the unfortunate girl.

"Where were they taking her, Hughes — do you know?"

"Wa'n't but one place fer 'em to take her — the

Cheyennes hev got winter camp down yonder on the Canadian — Black Kettle's outfit. Onc't thar, all hell could n't pry her loose."

"And Le Fevre dared go there? Among those hostiles?"

"Him!" Hughes laughed scornfully. "Why, he 's hand in glove with the whole bunch. He 's raided with 'em, decked out in feathers an' war-paint."

The Sergeant thought rapidly and leaped to a sudden conclusion.

"And you were trying to kill him when you shot us up?"

"Thet wus the idea, stranger; if I got a friend o' yourn, I 'm powerful sorry."

CHAPTER XXVIII

SNOWBOUND

THE gleam in Hamlin's eyes impelled the other to go on, and explain fully.

"Lord, I know how yer feel, stranger, an', I reckon, if yer was to plug me right yere it would n't more 'n even matters up. But yer listen furst afore yer shoot. Thet Kiowa Black Smoke was sent on ahead, an' got yere afore the storm. He said them others wus 'bout four hours behind, an' headin' fer this yere cabin to make camp. They wa'n't hurryin' none, fer they did n't suspect they wus bein' tracked. Well, thet was my chance; what I 'd been campin' out yere months a-waitin' fer. I did n't expect ter git nuthin' back, y' understand; all I wanted was ter kill that damn skunk, an' squar accounts. It looked ter me then like I hed him on the hip. He did n't know I was in the kintry; all I hed to do was lay out in the hills, an' take a pot-shot at him afore he saw me."

"And get the girl and the money."

"As God is my witness, I never thought 'bout thet. I jest wanted ter plug him. I know it sounds sorter cowardly, but that fellow 's a gun-fighter, an' he hed two Injuns with him. Anyhow that wus my notion, an' as soon as Black Smoke went lopin' up the valley, I loaded up, an' climbed them bluffs, to whar I hed a good look-out erlong the north trail. I laid out thar all night. The storm come up, an' I mighty nigh froze, but snuggled down inter ther snow an' stuck. When yer onc't get a killin' freak on, yer goin' through hell an' high water ter get yer man. Thet 's how I felt. Well, just 'long 'bout daylight an outfit showed up. With my eyes half froze over, an' ther storm blowin' the snow in my face, I could n't see much — nuthin' but outlines o' hosses an' men. But thar was four o' 'em, an' a big fellow ahead breakin' trail. Course I thought it was Le Fevre; I wa'n't lookin' fer no one else, an' soon as I dared, I let drive. He flopped over dead as a door nail, an' then I popped away a couple o' times at the others. One fell down, an' I thought I got him, but did n't wait to make sure; just turned and hoofed it fer cover, knowin' the storm would hide my trail. I 'd got the man I went after, an' just natch'ally did n't give er whoop what become o' the rest. As I went down the bank I heard 'em

shootin' so I knowed some wus alive yet an' it would be better fer me to crawl inter my hole an' lie still."

Hamlin sat motionless, staring at the man, not quite able to comprehend his character. Killing was part of the western code, and he could appreciate Hughes' eagerness for revenge, but the underlying cowardice in the man was almost bewildering. Finally he got up, swept the revolver on the bench into his pocket, walked over, and picked up the gun.

"Now, Hughes," he said quietly. "I 'll talk, and you listen. In my judgment you are a miserable sneaking cur, and I am going to trust you just so far as I can watch you. I suppose I ought to shoot you where you are, and have done with it. You killed one of the best men who ever lived, a friend of mine, Sam Wasson —"

"Who?"

"Sam Wasson, a government scout."

Hughes dropped his face into his hands.

"Good Lord! I knew him!"

The Sergeant drew a deep breath, and into his face there came a look almost of sympathy.

"Then you begin to realize the sort of fool you are," he went on soberly. "They don't make better men out here; his little finger was worth more than

your whole body. But killing you won't bring Sam back, and besides I reckon you 've told me the straight story, an' his shooting was an accident in a way. Then you 're more useful to me just now alive than you would be dead. My name is Hamlin, sergeant Seventh Cavalry, and I am here after that man Le Fevre. We trailed his outfit from Dodge until the storm struck us, and then came straight through travelling by compass. I did not know the man's name was Le Fevre until you told me; up in Kansas he is known as Dupont."

"That 's it; that 's the name he took when he sold the cattle."

"The officer robbed and killed was Major McDonald, and it is his daughter they hold. The fellow Dupont quarrelled with and shot was a deserter named Connors. We found the body. Now where do you suppose Le Fevre is?"

Hughes stared into the fire, nervously pulling his beard.

"Wall, I 'd say in west yere somewhar along the Cimarron. 'T ain't likely he had a compass, an' the wind wus from the nor'east. Best they could do, the ponies would drift. The Injuns would keep the gineral direction, o' course, storm 'er no storm, an'

Gene is some plainsman himself, but thet blizzard would sheer 'em off all the same. I reckon they 're under the banks ten mile, er more, up thar. An' soon as there 's a change in weather, they 'll ride fer Black Kettle's camp. Thet 's my guess, mister."

Hamlin turned the situation over deliberately in his mind, satisfied that Hughes had reviewed the possibilities correctly. If Le Fevre's party had got through at all, then that was the most likely spot for them to be hiding in. They would have drifted beyond doubt, farther than Hughes supposed, probably, as he had been sheltered from the real violence of the wind as it raged on the open plain. They might be fifteen, even twenty miles away, and so completely drifted in as to be undiscoverable except through accident. What course then was best to pursue? The storm was likely to continue violent for a day, perhaps two days longer. His horses were exhausted, and Carroll helpless. It might not even be safe to leave the latter alone. Yet if the frozen man could be left in the hut to take care of himself and the ponies, would there be any hope of success in an effort to proceed up the river on foot? He could make Hughes go — that was n't the difficulty — but probably they could n't cover five miles a day through the snowdrifts. And,

even if they did succeed in getting through in time to intercept the fugitives, the others would possess every advantage — both position for defense, and horses on which to escape. Hughes, lighting his pipe, confident now in his own mind that he was personally safe, seemed to sense the problem troubling the Sergeant.

"I reckon I know this yere kintry well 'nough," he said lazily, "ter give yer a pointer er two. I 've rounded up long-horns west o' yere. Them fellers ain't goin' to strike out fer the Canadian till after the storm quits. By thet time yer ponies is rested up in better shape than theirs will be, and we kin strike 'cross to the sou'west. We 're bound either to hit 'em, or ride 'cross thar trail."

"But the woman!" protested Hamlin, striding across the floor. "What may happen to her in the meanwhile? She is an Eastern girl, unaccustomed to this life,— a — a lady."

"Yer don't need worry none 'bout thet. Ef she 's the right kind she 'll stan' more 'n a man when she has to. I reckon it won't be none too pleasant 'long with Gene an' them Cheyenne bucks, but if she 's pulled through so far, thar ain't nuthin' special goin' ter happen till they git to the Injun camp."

"You mean her fate will be decided in council?"

"Sure; thet 's Cheyenne law. Le Fevre knows it, an' ol' Koleta would knife him in a minute if he got gay. He 's a devil all right — thet ol' buck — but he 's afraid of Black Kettle, an' thar won't be no harm done to the gal."

The Sergeant walked over to the fire, and stared down into the red embers, striving to control himself. He realized the truth of all Hughes said, and yet had to fight fiercely his inclination to hasten to her rescue. The very thought of her alone in those ruthless hands was torture. There was no selfishness in the man's heart, no hope of winning this girl for himself, yet he knew now that he loved her; that for him she was the one woman in all the world. Her face was in his memory; the very soughing of the wind seemed her voice calling him. But the real man in him — the plainsman instinct — conquered the impetuosity of the lover. There must be no mistake made — no rash, hopeless effort. Better delay, than ultimate failure, and Hughes' plan was the more practical way. He lifted his head, his lips set with decision.

"You 're right, old man. We 'll wait," he said sternly. "Now to get ready. Have you a corral?"

The other made a gesture with his hand.

"Twenty rod b'low, under the bluff."

"We 'll drive the horses down, feed and water them. But first come with me; there is a half-frozen man up yonder."

They ploughed through the snow together, choking and coughing in the thick swirl of flakes that beat against their faces. The three horses, powdered white, stood tails to the storm, with heads to the bluff, while the drifts completely covered Carroll. He was sleeping, warm in the blankets, and the two men picked him up and stumbled along with their burden to the shelter of the cabin. Then Hughes faced the blizzard again, leading the horses to the corral, while Hamlin ministered to the semi-conscious soldier, laying him out upon a pile of soft skins, and vigorously rubbing his limbs to restore circulation. The man was stupid from exposure, and in some pain, but exhibited no dangerous symptoms. When wrapped again in his blankets, he fell instantly asleep. Hughes returned, mantled with snow, and, as the door opened, the howl of the storm swept by.

"No better outside?"

"Lord, no! Worse, if anything. Wind more east, sweepin' the snow up the valley. We 'll be plum

shet up in an hour, I reckon. Hosses all right, though."

In the silence they could hear the fierce beating against the door, the shrieking of the storm-fiend encompassing them about.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CHASE

HAMLIN never forgot those two days and nights of waiting, while the storm roared without and the clouds of drifting snow made any dream of advance impossible. Trained as he was to patience, the delay left marks in his face, and his nerves throbbed with pain. His mind was with her constantly, even in moments of uneasy sleep, picturing her condition unsheltered from the storm, and protected only by Le Fevre and his two Indian allies. If he could only reach them, only strike a blow for her release, it would be such a relief. The uncertainty weighed upon him, giving unrestricted play to the imagination, and, incidentally awakening a love for the girl so overwhelming as almost to frighten him. He had fought this feeling heretofore, sternly, deliberately, satisfied that such ambition was hopeless. He would not attempt to lower her to his level, nor give her the unhappiness of knowing that he dared misconstrue her frank friendliness into aught more tender. But these misfortunes

had changed the entire outlook. Now he flung all pretence aside, eager to place his life on the altar to save her. Even a dim flame of hope began blazing in his heart — hope that he might yet wring from Le Fevre a confession that would clear his name. He knew his man at last — knew him, and would track him now with all the pitiless ingenuity of a savage. Once he could stand erect, absolved of disgrace, a man again among men, he would ignore the uniform of the ranks, and go to her with all the pride of his race. Ay! and down in his heart he knew that she would welcome his coming; that her eyes would not look at the uniform, but down into the depths of his own.

He thought of it all as he paced the floor, or stared into the fire, while outside the wind raged and howled, piling the snow against the cabin front, and whirling in mad bursts up the valley. It would be death to face the fury of it on those open plains. There was nothing left him but to swear, and pace back and forth. Twice he and Hughes fought their way to the corral, found the horses sheltered in a little cove, and brought them food and water. The struggle to accomplish this was sufficient proof of the impossibility of going farther. Exhausted and breathless they staggered back into the quietness of the cabin, feeling as though

they had been beaten by clubs. Once, desperate to attempt something, Hamlin suggested searching for the bodies of Wasson and Wade, but Hughes shook his head, staring at the other as though half believing him demented. The Sergeant strode to the door and looked out into the smother of snow; then came back without a word of protest.

Carroll improved steadily, complaining of pain where the frost had nipped exposed flesh, yet able to sit up, and eat heartily. There remained a numbness in his feet and legs, however, which prevented his standing alone, and both the others realized that he would have to be left behind when the storm abated. Hughes would go without doubt; on this point the Sergeant was determined. He did not altogether like or trust the man; he could not blot from memory the cowardly shot which had killed Wasson, nor entirely rid himself of a fear that he, himself, had failed an old comrade, in not revenging his death; yet one thing was clear — the man's hatred for Le Fevre made him valuable. Treacherous as he might be by nature, now his whole soul was bent on revenge. Moreover he knew the lay of the land, the trail the fugitives would follow, and to some extent Black Kettle's camp. Little by little Hamlin drew from him every detail of Le

Fevre's life in the cattle country, becoming more and more convinced that both men were thieves, their herds largely stolen through connivance with Indians. Undoubtedly Le Fevre was the bigger rascal of the two, and possessed greater influence because of his marriage into the tribe.

It was the second midnight when the wind died down. Hamlin, sleeping fitfully, seemed to sense the change; he rose, forced the door open, and peered out eagerly. There was lightness to the sky, and all about, the unbroken expanse of snow sparkled in cold crystals. Nothing broke the white desolation but the dark waters of the river still unfrozen, and the gaunt limbs of the cottonwoods, now standing naked and motionless. The silence was profound, seeming almost painful after the wild fury of the past days. He could hear the soft purr of the water, and Carroll's heavy breathing. And it was cold, bitterly cold, the chill of it penetrating to his very bones. But for that he had no care — his mind had absorbed the one important fact; the way was open, they could go. He shook Hughes roughly into wakefulness, giving utterance to sharp, tense orders, as though he dealt with a man of his own troop.

"Turn out — lively, now. Yes, the storm is over.

It 's midnight, or a little after, and growing cold. Put on your heavy stuff, and bring up the two best horses. Come, now; you 'll step off quicker than that, Hughes, if you ride with me. I 'll have everything ready by the time you get here. Eat! Hell! We 'll eat in the saddle! What 's that, Carroll?'

"Ye ain't a-goin' to leave me yere alone, are ye, Sergeant?"

"No; there 'll be two horses to keep you company. You 've got a snap, man; plenty to eat, and a good fire — what more do you want — a nurse? Hughes, what, in the name of Heaven, are you standing there for? Perhaps you would like to have me stir you up. I will if those horses are not here in ten minutes."

The cowman, muffled to the ears in a buffalo coat, plunged profanely into the drift, slamming the door behind him. Hamlin hastily glanced over the few articles piled in readiness on the bench — ammunition, blankets, food — paying no heed to Carroll's muttering of discontent. By the time Hughes returned, he had everything strapped for the saddles. He thrust the cowman's rifle under his own flap, but handed the latter a revolver, staring straight into his eyes as he did so.

"I reckon you and I have got enough in common

in this chase to play square," he said grimly. "We 're both out after Le Fevre, ain't we?"

"You bet."

"All right, then; here 's your gun. If you try any trickery, Hughes, I 'd advise that you get me the first shot, for if you miss you 'll never have another."

The man drew the sleeve of his coat over his lips, his eyes shifting before the Sergeant's steady gaze.

"I ain't thet sort," he muttered uneasily. "Yer don't need to think thet o' me."

"Maybe not," and Hamlin swung into the saddle carelessly. "Only I thought I 'd tell you beforehand what would happen if you attempt any fool gun-play. Take the lead, you know the trail."

Carroll, supporting himself by the table, crept across to the door and watched them, reckless as to the entering cold. The glare of the white snow revealed clearly the outlines of the disappearing horsemen, as they rode cautiously down the bank. The thin fringe of shore ice broke under the weight of the ponies' hoofs, as the riders forced them forward into the icy water. A moment later the two crept up the sharp incline of the opposite shore, appearing distinct against the sky as they attained the summit. Hamlin waved his hand, and then, on a lope, the figures vanished into the gloom.

Crying, and swearing at his helplessness, the deserted soldier closed the door, and crept back shivering into his blankets.

Hughes turned his horse's head to the southwest, and rode steadily forward, the buffalo overcoat giving him a shaggy, grotesque appearance in the spectral light reflected from the snow. Without a word Hamlin followed, a pace behind. Their route lay for the first few miles across a comparatively level plateau, over which the fierce wind of the late storm had swept with such violence as to leave the surface packed firm. The night shut them in silently, giving to their immediate surroundings a mournful loneliness most depressing. There were no shadows, only the dull snow-gleam across which they passed like spectres, the only sound the crunching of their horses' hoofs on the crust. The Sergeant, staring about, felt that he had never looked upon a more depressing spectacle than this gloomy landscape, desolate and wind-swept, still overarched with low-lying storm clouds, black and ominous.

They advanced thus for two hours, making no attempt to force their animals, and scarcely exchanging a word, both men watchful of the snow underfoot in search of a possible trail, when the character of the country began to change. The level plain broke into

a series of ridges of irregular formation, all evidently heading toward some more southern valley. In the depressions the snow lay banked in deep drifts, and, after plunging desperately through two of these, unable to judge correctly in the dim light where to ride, Hughes turned more to the south, skirting along the bare slope of a ridge, trusting some turn lower down would yield them the necessary westerning.

"It 's over the ponies' heads down thar, Sergeant," he said, pointing sideways into the dark hollow, "an' we 're bound to strike a cross-ridge afore we come to the bluffs."

"What bluffs? The Canadian?"

"Yep; it 's badly broken kintry a long ways west o' yere. Bad lands, mostly, an' a hell o' a place for cattle to hide out."

"Hughes, do you know where Black Kettle's camp is?"

"Well, no, not exactly. Las' winter the Cheyennes was settled 'bout opposite the mouth o' Buffalo Creek, an' thar 're down thar somewhar now. Thar 's one thing sure — they ain't any east o' thet. As we ain't hit no trail, I reckon as how Le Fevre's outfit must hev drifted further then I calc'lated."

"I thought so at the time," commented the other

quietly. "However, we will have to make the circle, and, if the country out yonder is as you describe, they will be no better off. They 'll have to follow the ridges to get through. We may get a glimpse when daylight comes."

They rode on steadily, keeping down below the crest of the hills, yet picking a passage where the snow had been swept clear. The slipperiness of the incline made their progress slow, as they dared not risk the breaking of a horse's leg in that wilderness, and the faint light glimmer was most confusing. The wind had ceased, the calm was impressive after the wild tumult, but the cold seemed to strengthen as the dawn advanced, viciously biting the exposed faces of the men. The straining ponies were white with frost. In the gray of a cheerless dawn they reached the first line of bluffs, and drew rein just below the summit, where they could look off across the lower ridges to the westward.

It was a wild, desolate scene, the dull gray sky overhead, the black and white shading below. Mile on mile the picture unrolled to the horizon, the vista widening slowly as the light increased, bringing forth the details of barren, wind-swept ridges and shallow valleys choked with snow. Not a tree, not a shrub,

not even a rock broke the dead monotony. All was loneliness and silence. The snow lay gleaming and untrampled, except as here and there a dull brown patch of dead grass darkened the side of a hill. Hamlin shadowed his eyes with gloved hands, studying intently inch by inch the wide domain. Suddenly he arose in his stirrups, bending eagerly forward.

"By heaven! There they are, Hughes," he exclaimed, feeling the hot blood course through his veins. "See, on the incline of that third ridge. There is a shadow there, and they are not moving. Here; draw in back of me; now you can see. It looks as though they had a horse down."

Hughes stared long in the direction indicated, his eyes narrowed into mere slits.

"Ah! that 's it," he said at last. "Horse broke a leg; shot it jest then — I seen the flash. Now they 're goin' on. See! One fellow climbin' up behind 'nother, an' the horse left lyin' thar on the snow."

"How many people do you make out?" and Hamlin's voice shook a little. "There 's four, ain't there?"

At that distance the fugitives looked like mere black dots. It could scarcely be determined that they moved, and yet their outlines were distinct against the

background of white snow, while the two watchers possessed the trained vision of the plains. Hughes answered after a deliberate inspection, without so much as turning his head.

"Thar 's four; leastwise thar was four hosses, and two — the Injuns likely — are ridin' double. Thar animals are 'bout played, it looks ter me — just able ter crawl. Ain't had no fodder is 'bout the size o' it. We ought to be able ter head thet bunch off 'fore they git to the Canadian at thet rate o' travel — hey, Sergeant?"

Hamlin's eyes followed the long sweep of the cross-ridge, studying its trend, and the direction of the intervening valleys. Once down on the other slope all this extensive view would be hidden; they would have to ride blindly, guessing at the particular swale along which those others were advancing. To come to the summit again would surely expose them to those keen Indian eyes. They would be searching the trail ahead ceaselessly, noting every object along the crests of the ridges. However, if the passage around was not blocked with snow, they ought to attain the junction in ample time. With twice as far to travel, their ponies were strong and fit, and should win out against Le Fevre's starved beasts. He waved his gloved hand.

"We 'll try it," he said shortly; "come on, Hughes."

He led off along the steep side of the hill, and forcing his horse into a sharp trot, headed straight out into the white wilderness; Hughes, without uttering a word, brought down his quirt on his pony's flank and followed.

CHAPTER XXX

THE FIGHT IN THE SNOW

THE slope toward the south had not been swept clear by the wind, and the horses broke through the crust to their knees, occasionally stumbling into hollows where the drifts were deep. This made progress slow, although Hamlin pressed forward recklessly, fully aware of what it would mean should the fugitives emerge first, and thus achieve a clear passage to the river. What was going on there to the right, behind the fringe of low hills, could not be conjectured, but to the left the riders could see clearly for a great distance over the desolate, snow-draped land, down to the dark waters of the Canadian and the shore beyond. It was all a deserted waste, barren of movement, and no smoke bore evidence of any Indian encampment near by. A mile or more to the west the river took a sharp bend, disappearing behind the bluffs, and on the open plain, barely visible against the unsullied mantle of snow, were dark specks, apparently moving, but in erratic fashion. The distance intervening was too

great for either man to distinguish exactly what these might be, yet as they plunged onward their keen eyes searched the valley vigilantly through the cold clear air.

"Some of your long-horns, Hughes?" asked the Sergeant finally, pointing as he turned and glanced back. "Quite a bunch of cattle, it looks to me."

"Them thar ain't cows," returned the other positively. "Tha 're too closely bunched up. I reckon it 'll be Black Kettle's pony herd."

"Then his village will lie in beyond the big bend there," and Hamlin rose in his stirrups, shading his eyes. "The herders have n't driven them far since the storm broke. You don't see any smoke, do you?"

Hughes shook his head.

"You would n't likely see none against thet gray sky; them ponies is two er maybe three miles off, an' ther camp is likely a mile er so further. Thar 's a big bend thar, as I remember; a sort o' level spot with bluff all 'round, 'cept on the side o' ther river. We hed a cattle corral thar onc't, durin' a round-up. Most likely that 's whar they are."

"And Le Fevre is heading straight for the spot. Well, he 'll have to come out on this bench first."

"Yep, there sure ain't no valleys lying between.

How many o' these yere gulch openings have we got past already?"

"Three; there 's the fourth just ahead. That 's the one they were trailing through. No doubt about that, is there?"

"Not 'less them Injuns took to the ridge. They wus sure in the fourth valley when we fust sighted the outfit back thar. Whatcher goin' ter do, Sergeant? Jump 'em a hoss-back, an' just pump lead?"

Hamlin had thought this over as he rode and already had planned his attack. The opening to the valley, along which Le Fevre's exhausted party were slowly advancing toward them, seemed favorable — it was narrow and badly choked with snow. It offered an ideal place for a surprise and was far enough away from the Indian encampment — if the latter was situated as Hughes believed, in the great bend above — so that no echo of shots would carry that distance, even through the crisp atmosphere. There were two things the Sergeant had determined to accomplish if possible — the rescue of Miss Molly uninjured, and the capture of Le Fevre. No matter how deeply he despised the man he could not afford to have him killed. So far as the Indians were concerned there would be no mercy shown, for if either one escaped he would carry

the news to the village. With all this in his mind the Sergeant swung out of the saddle, dropping the rein to the ground, confident that the tired cow-pony would remain quiet. His belt was buckled outside the army overcoat, and he drew his revolver, tested it, and slipped it back loosely into the holster. Then he pulled out the rifle from under the flap of the saddle, grimly handling it in his gloved fingers. Hughes, his head sunk into his fur collar, his hot breath steaming in the cold atmosphere, watched him curiously.

"Lookin' fer a right smart fight, I reckon," he said, a trifle uneasily. "Believe me, yer ain't goin' ter find thet fellar no spring chicken. He 's some on ther gun play."

"I hope he knows enough to quit when he 's cornered," returned the other pleasantly, sweeping his eyes to the opening in the hills, "for I 'm aiming to take him back to Kansas alive."

"The hell ye are!"

"That 's the plan, pardner, and I 've got reason for it. I knew Le Fevre once, years ago, during the war, and I 've been some anxious to get my hands on him ever since. He 's worth far more to me alive than dead, just now, and, Hughes," his voice hardening, "you 'll bear that fact in mind when the fracas

begins. From now on this is my affair, not yours. You understand? You get busy with the two bucks, and leave the white man to me. Come on now,— dismount."

Hughes came to the ground with evident reluctance, swearing savagely.

"What do yer think I 'm yere for," he demanded roughly, "if it wa'n't to shoot that cuss?"

Hamlin strode swiftly over, and dropped a hand on the shaggy shoulder.

"You are here because I ordered you to come with me; because if you had n't I would have killed you back there in the shack, you red-handed murderer. Now listen, Hughes. I know what you are — a cattle thief. You and Le Fevre belong to the same outfit, only he was the smarter of the two. I have spared your life for a purpose, and if you fail me now I 'll shoot you down as I would a dog. Don't try to threaten me, you cur, for I am not that kind. I am not trusting you; I have n't from the first, but you are going into this fight on my side, and under my orders."

The two men glared into each other's eyes, silent, breathing hard, but there was a grim determination about the Sergeant's set jaw that left Hughes speechless. He grinned weakly, stamping down the snow

under foot. Hamlin's continued silence brought a protest to his lips.

"Damn if I know why you say that," he began. "Have n't I been square?"

"Because I know your style, Hughes. You hate Le Fevre for the dirty trick he played on you, but you 'd sell out to him again in five minutes if you thought there was any money in it. I don't propose giving you the chance. You 'll go ahead, and you are in more danger from me than that outfit yonder. Now move, and we 'll take a look up the valley."

They ploughed a way through the drifts to the mouth of the narrow opening between the hills, dropping to their knees in the snow, and cautiously creeping forward the last few yards. Hamlin, convinced that fear alone could control the ex-cowthief, kept slightly to the rear.

"Now wait, Hughes," he said, his voice lowered but still tense with command. "Be careful, man. Crawl up there in between those drifts, and look over. Keep down low, you fool."

The two men wriggled slowly forward, smothered in the snowdrift, until Hughes' eyes barely topped the surface. Hamlin lay outstretched a foot below, watchful for the slightest sign of treachery. The cowman

stared up the depression, blinking his eyes in the snow glare. The impatient Sergeant gripped his arm.

"Well, what is it? Are they coming?"

"You bet, an' about dead, from the looks of 'em. Them fellars ain't lookin' fer nuthin'. I reckon I could stand up straight yere an' they 'd never see me. Take a look yerself; it 's safe 'nough."

Hamlin drew himself up, and peered out over the snow, but still gripped the other's arm. With his first glance up the valley there swept over him a strange feeling of sympathy for those he was hunting. It was a dismal, depressing picture — the bare, snow-covered hillsides, and between, floundering weakly through the drifts, the little party of fugitives, the emaciated ponies staggering with weakness, the men on foot, reeling as they tramped forward, their heads lowered in utter weariness. The girl alone was in saddle, so wrapped about in blankets as to be formless, even her face concealed. The manner in which she swayed to the movements of the pony, urged on by one of the Indians, was evidence that she was bound fast, and helpless. At sight of her condition Hamlin felt his old relentless purpose return. He was plainsman enough to realize what suffering those men had passed through before reaching such extremity, and was quick to appreciate

the full meaning of their exhaustion, and to sympathize with it. He had passed through a similar baptism, and remembered the desperate clutch of the storm-king.

But the sight of that poor girl swaying helplessly in the saddle, a bound prisoner in the midst of those ruffians, who had murdered her father before her eyes and who were bearing her to all the unspeakable horrors of Indian captivity, instantly stifled within him every plea of mercy. No matter what they had suffered, they were a ruthless, merciless gang of cutthroats and thieves, fleeing from justice, deserving of no consideration. Yet their distressed appearance, their lack of vigilance, rendered him careless. They seemed too weak to resist, too exhausted to fight; the cold plucking at their hearts had seemingly already conquered. It was this impression which caused him to act recklessly, rising to his feet, rifle in hand, directly in their track, halting their advance with stern command.

"Hands up! Quick now, the three of you! Don't wait, Dupont; I 've got the drop!"

The white man was in front, a huge, shapeless figure in his furs, his black beard frosted oddly. He stood motionless, astounded at this strange apparition in blue

cavalry overcoat, which had sprung up so suddenly in that wilderness. For an instant he must have deemed the vision confronting him some illusion of the desert, for he never stirred except to rub a gloved hand across his eyes.

"By all the gods, Dupont," roared the Sergeant impatiently, "do you want me to shoot? Damn you, throw up your hands!"

Slowly, as though his mind was still in a dream, the man's hands were lifted above his head, one grasping a short, sawed-off gun. The expression upon his face was ugly, as he began to dimly understand what this unexpected hold-up meant. There followed an instant of silence, in which Hamlin, forgetful of Hughes, who still remained lying quiet in the snow, took a step or two forward, rifle at shoulder. The two Indians, swathed in blankets, but with arms upraised, were in direct line, motionless as statues. He could see the gleam of their dark eyes, and even noticed the figure of the girl straighten in the saddle.

Dupont gave fierce utterance to an oath. Apparently he failed to recognize the soldier, but as Hughes rose to his knees, suspicion leaped instantly to his brain.

"A hold-up, hey!" he said coolly. "Hughes, you

sneaking old coward, come out into the open once. What is it you want?"

"Nothing to that, Dupont," returned the Sergeant, glancing back questioningly toward his companion. "Your old partner is here under my orders. I am Sergeant Hamlin, Seventh Cavalry. Throw down that gun!"

"What! You —"

"Yes, you are my prisoner. I've followed you from Dodge. Throw down the gun!"

It was dropped sullenly into the snow.

"Now, Hughes, go ahead, and disarm those Indians."

The cowman shuffled forward, revolver in hand, circling to keep safely beyond reach of Dupont, who eyed him maliciously. The latter was so buttoned up in a buffalo coat as to make it impossible for him to reach a weapon, and Hamlin permitted his eyes to waver slightly, as he watched the Indians. What occurred the next instant came so suddenly as scarcely to leave an impression. It was swift, instinctive action, primitive impulse. An Indian hand fell beneath its blanket covering; there was a flash of flame across a pony's saddle; Hughes sprang backward, and went reeling into the snow. Hamlin fired, as the savage

dodged between the horse's legs, sending him sprawling, and, ignoring the other Indian, swung about to cover Dupont. Swift as he moved, he was too late. With one desperate spring backward the white man was behind the woman's pony, sheltered by her shapeless figure, gripping the animal's bit. The second Indian dropped to his knees and opened fire. With a sudden lurch forward the Sergeant plunged headlong in the snow.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE GIRL AND THE MAN

AS he went down, uninjured, but realizing now that this was to be a battle to the death, Hamlin flung open his coat, and gripped his revolver. Lying there on his face he fired twice, deliberately, choosing the exposed Indian as a target. The latter, striving to mount his frightened pony, fell forward, grasping the mane desperately, a stream of blood dyeing his blanket as the animal dashed across the valley. Dupont had whirled the girl's horse to the left, and, with her body as a shield, was attempting to escape. Already he was too far away to make a revolver shot safe. Hamlin arose to his knees, and picked up the dropped rifle. His lips were pressed tight; his eyes full of grim determination. Why did n't Dupont fire? Could it be he was unarmed? Or was he hoping by delay to gain a closer shot? Keen-eyed, resolute, the Sergeant determined to take no chances. The rifle came to a level,—a spurt of flame, a sharp report, and the pony staggered to its knees, and sank, bearing its helpless burden with

it. Dupont let go his grip on the rein, and stood upright, clearly outlined against the white hillside, staring back toward the kneeling Sergeant, the faint smoke cloud whirling between.

"All right — damn you! — you 've got me!" he said sullenly.

Hamlin never moved, except to snap out the emptied cartridge.

"Unbutton that coat," he commanded tersely. "Now turn around. No shooting iron, hey! That 's rather careless of a gun-man."

He dropped his rifle, and strode forward revolver in hand, glancing curiously at the dead Indian as he passed. A riata hung to the pommel of a saddle, and he paused to shake it loose, uncoiling the thin rope, but with watchful eyes constantly on his prisoner. He felt no fear of Dupont, now that he knew the fellow to be unarmed, and the wounded Indian had vanished over the ridge. Yet Dupont was a powerful man, and desperate enough to accept any chance. Something in the sullen, glowering face confronting him awoke the Sergeant to caution. He seemed to sense the plan of the other, and stopped suddenly, slipping the rope through his fingers.

He swung the coil about his head, measuring the

distance, every faculty concentrated on the toss. He had forgotten Hughes lying in the snow behind; he neither saw nor heard the fellow scramble weakly to his knees, revolver outstretched in a half-frozen hand. And Hughes, his eyes already glazing in death, saw only the two figures. In that moment hate triumphed over cowardice; he could not distinguish which was Dupont, which Hamlin. In the madness of despair he cared little — only he would kill some one before he died. His weapon wavered frantically as he sought to aim, the man holding himself up by one hand. Dupont, facing that way, saw this apparition, and leaped aside, stumbling over the dead pony. Hughes' weapon belched, and Hamlin, the lasso whirling above him in the air, pitched forward, and came crashing down into the snow.

It was all the work of an instant, a wild, confused bit, so rapidly enacted as to seem unreal even to the participants. Hamlin lay motionless, barely conscious of living, yet unable to stir a muscle. Hughes, screaming out one oath, sank back into a heap, his frozen fingers still gripping his smoking weapon. Then Dupont rose cautiously to his knees, peering forth across the dead body of the pony. The man was unnerved, unable at first to comprehend what had

occurred. He was saved as by a miracle, and his great form shook from head to foot. Then, as his eyes rested on the outstretched body of the Sergeant, hate conquered every other feeling; he staggered to his feet, picked up the gun lying in the snow, walked across, and brutally kicked the prostrate form. There was no response, no movement.

"All I wish is that I'd been the one to kill yer," he growled savagely, grinning down. "Hell of a good shot, though I reckon the blame fool meant it for me." He threw the rifle forward, in readiness, and moved cautiously over toward Hughes.

"Deader than a door-nail," he muttered, pressing back the buffalo coat, and staring contemptuously down into the white, staring face. "I wonder how that coward ever happened to be here — laying out for me, I reckon!"

He straightened up and laughed, glancing furtively about.

"Some good joke that. The whole outfit cleaned out, and me twenty thousand to the good," feeling inside his coat to make sure. "It's there all right. Well, good-bye, boys, there don't seem to be nothing here for me to stay for."

He caught the straying pony and swung up into the

saddle, glanced about once more at the motionless figures, and finally rode off up the ridge, unconsciously following the tracks left by the fleeing Indian. If the girl ever occurred to him, he gave no sign of remembrance, and she uttered no word. Lying on her side, her eyes wide open, she watched him ride away, across the barren space, until the slow-moving pony topped the ridge, and disappeared on the other side. Twice the man turned and glanced back into the valley, but saw nothing except the black blotches on the snow. Molly made no motion, no outcry. She preferred death there alone, rather than rescue at his hands. Scarcely conscious, feeling no strength in her limbs, no hope pulsing at her heart, she closed her eyes and lay still. Yet wrapped about as she was, her young body remained warm, and the very disappearance of Dupont yielded a sense of freedom, awoke a strong desire to live. Her eyes opened again, despairingly, and gazed across the barren expanse. She could see Hamlin lying face downward, the yellow lining of his cavalry cape over his head. It seemed to her the man's foot moved. Could she be dreaming? No! He actually drew up one limb.

This evidence that the Sergeant still lived gave her fresh strength and renewed determination. She strug-

gled to move her own feet; the left was free, but the right was caught firmly beneath the pony. She struggled desperately, forgetful of pain, in the faith that she might save Hamlin. Little by little she worked the imprisoned limb free, only to find it numb and helpless. She lay there breathless, conscious that she ached from head to foot. Beyond her the Sergeant groaned and turned partially over upon his side. Tugging at the blanket she managed to free one arm, gripped the mane of the dead pony, and drew herself into a sitting posture. Now the blood seemed to surge through her veins in new volume, and she labored feverishly to release the other hand. At last she undid a knot with her teeth, and slipped the blanket from her, beating her hands together to restore circulation. Her right leg still was too numb to stand upon, but she crept forward, dragging it helplessly behind her over the snow, to where Hamlin lay.

The girl's heart seemed to stop beating as she looked at him — at the white, colorless face, the closed eyes, the discoloration of blood staining the temple. Yet he lived; his faint breath was plainly perceptible in the frosty air.

"O God!" she sobbed, "what can I do!"

It was an unrestrained cry of anguish, yet there was

no hesitation in action. She had forgotten everything except that helpless figure lying before her on the snow — her own danger, the surrounding desolation, the dead forms accentuating that wilderness tragedy. With bare hands she bathed his face in snow, rubbing the flesh until it flushed red, pressing her own warm body against his, her lips speaking his name again and again, almost hysterically, as though she hoped thus to call him back to consciousness. Her exploring fingers told her that it was no serious wound which had creased the side of his head; if there was no other he would surely revive, and the discovery sent her blood throbbing through her veins. She lifted his head to her lap, chafing his cold wrists frantically, her eyes staring again out across the barren snow fields, with fresh realization of their intense loneliness. She choked back a sob of despair, and glanced down again into Hamlin's face. He did not stir but his eyes were open, regarding her in bewilderment.

"Molly," he whispered, forgetting, "is this really you? What has happened?"

The girl's eyes filled instantly with tears, but she did not move, except that the clasp of her hands grew stronger.

"Yes, I am Molly; please do not move yet. You have been hurt, but it is all right now."

"Hurt!" he lifted his head slightly and stared about; then dropped it again with a sigh of content. "Oh, yes, now I know. Hughes shot me from behind." He struggled upright, in spite of her efforts at restraint, feeling beside him for the rifle. "Dupont was there, behind that dead pony. What became of Dupont?"

She dropped her face in her hands, her form trembling.

"He — he got away. He thought you were dead; to — to make sure he came over and kicked you. Then he took your rifle, and the only pony left, and rode off."

"And left you?"

"Yes — he — he never thought of me; only — only how he should escape with the money. I never moved, never opened my eyes; perhaps he believed me dead also, and — and I prayed he would. I would rather have died than have him touch me again. And — and I thought you were dead too. O God! It was so horrible!"

The man's voice was soft and low, thrilling with the love that refused control.

"I know, dear; I know it all, now," he said

tenderly, clasping her hands. "But that is all over and gone." He put up one hand to his wound. "Heavens, how my head aches! But that pain won't last long. I am a bit groggy yet, but will be on my feet pretty soon. You are a brave little girl. Tell me how you got free?"

She went over the short story slowly, not lifting her eyes to his, and he listened in silence, moving his limbs about, confident of the gradual return of strength.

"But how did it happen?" he asked. "Your capture? Your father's death? It is all a mystery to me after I left you on the hotel balcony."

The tears stood in her eyes suddenly uplifted to his, and impulsively the man encircled her with his arm.

"You know I care, dear," he exclaimed recklessly. "You are not afraid to tell me."

"No, no; you have been so kind, so true. I can tell you everything — only it is so hard to confess the truth about my father."

"You suspect he was implicated?" he asked in astonishment, "that he actually had a part in the plot?"

She looked at him gravely, down into his very soul.

"Yes, and — and that hurts more than all the rest."

CHAPTER XXXII

WORDS OF LOVE

HAMLIN was silent for a moment, not knowing what to say that would comfort or help. He had never suspected this, and yet he could not refrain altogether from experiencing a feeling of relief. Deeply as he sympathized with her in this trouble, still the man could not but be conscious of those barriers formerly existing between them which this discovery had instantly swept away. Now they could meet upon a level, as man and woman. No longer could rank intervene; not even the stain of his own court-martial. Possibly she dreamed of what was passing in his mind, for she suddenly lifted her eyes to his.

"Shall I tell you?"

"No; not now; both your explanation and mine can wait," he replied quickly. "I can stand alone now — see," and he regained his feet, swaying slightly with dizziness, yet smiling down at her as he held forth a hand. "Now you try it; take hold of me until you

test your limbs — that was an ugly fall you got when I shot your pony."

She straightened slowly, her cheeks flushing in the keen air, her eyes striving to smile back in response to his challenge.

"That was nothing," she protested, tramping about. "I only went down into the snow, but my arms were bound, and the pony fell on my foot — it feels quite natural now."

"Good. We shall have to tramp a little way. In which direction did Dupont go?"

"Across the ridge there; see, that is his trail."

"Then he never saw our horses out yonder. That is one piece of good luck, at least. The sooner we get to them the better. I have been guilty of enough foolishness to-day to be careful hereafter." He looked across at Hughes' body. "I wonder if that fellow meant to hit me? I never trusted him much, but I did n't expect that. Did you see him fire?"

"Yes, but it was so sudden I could not even cry out. He was upon one knee, and his revolver waved like this as he tried to aim. Dupont saw it, and jumped just as he pulled the trigger."

"I thought so. The poor devil got the wrong man."

"Why? Were those two enemies?"

"They had been partners, stealing and running cattle. Dupont had cheated Hughes out of his share, and there was bad blood between them. I ran across the fellow up on the Cimarron, waiting for Dupont to come back to his old range. Did you ever hear Dupont called by any other name?"

She shook her head questioningly.

"No; was n't that his real name? The woman back there — was n't she his wife?"

"She was his wife, yes; but their name was not Dupont. That was assumed; the correct one was Le Fevre."

"Le Fevre! Why,— why, was n't that the name of the man you told me about once? — the officer who brought you those orders?"

"He is the same. I did not know him at Dodge; not until Hughes told me. He had changed greatly in appearance, and I only saw him at night. But it was because I knew that I failed to kill him here; I wanted him alive, so I could compel him to tell the truth."

She gave a little sob, her hands clasped together. The man's voice softened, and he took a step nearer, bending above her.

"And yet now I do not care quite as much as I did."

She looked up quickly into his face, and as swiftly lowered her lashes.

"You mean you have found other evidence?"

"No, but I have found you, dear. You need not try, for I am not going to let you get away. It is not the officer's daughter and the enlisted man any more. Those barriers are all gone. I do not mean that I am indifferent to the stain on my name, or any less desirous of wringing the truth from Gene Le Fevre's lips, but even the memory of that past can keep me silent no longer. You are alone in the world now, alone and in the shadow of disgrace — you need me."

He stopped, amazed at the boldness of his own words, and, in the silence of that hesitation, Molly lifted her eyes to his face.

"I think I have always needed you," she said simply.

He did not touch her, except to clasp the extended hands. The loneliness of the girl, here, helpless, alone with him in that wilderness of snow, bore in upon his consciousness with a suddenness that robbed him of all sense of triumph. He had spoken passionately, recklessly, inspired by her nearness, her dependence upon him. He had faith that she cared; her eyes, her

manner, had told him this, yet even now he could not realize all that was meant by that quiet confession. The iron discipline of years would not relax instantly; in spite of the boldness of his utterance, he was still the soldier, feeling the chasm of rank. Her very confession, so simply spoken, tended to confuse, to mystify him.

"Do you mean," he asked eagerly, "that you love me?"

"What else should I mean?" she said slowly. "It is not new to me; I have known for a long while."

"That I loved you!"

"Yes," smiling now. "Love is no mystery to a woman. I do not care because you are in the ranks; that is only a temporary condition. I knew you out there, at the very first, as a gentleman. I have never doubted you. Here, in this wilderness, I am not afraid. It is not because my father is dead or because he has been guilty of crime, that I say this. I would have said it before, on the balcony there in Dodge, had you asked me. It is not the uniform I love, but the man. Can you not understand?"

"Will you marry me — a sergeant of cavalry?"

She was still smiling, her eyes frankly looking into his own.

"I will marry David Hamlin," she answered firmly, "let him be what he may."

The man let out his suppressed breath in a sob of relief, his eyes brightening with triumph.

"Oh, Molly! Molly!" he cried, "I cannot tell you what this all means to me. There is no past now to my life, but all future."

"Am I that to you?"

"That! Yes, and a thousand times more! I had ambition once, opportunity, even wealth. They were swept away by a man's lie, a woman's perfidy. Out of that wreck, I crawled into the world again a mere thing. I lived simply because I must live, skulking in obscurity, my only inspiration the hope of an honorable death or an opportunity for vengeance. Mine was the life of the ranks in the desert, associating with the lowest scum, in constant contact with savagery. I could not speak to a decent woman, or be a man among men. There was nothing left me but to brood over wrongs, and plot revenge. I became morose, savage, a mere creature of discipline, food for powder. It was no more when I first met you. But with that meeting the chains snapped, the old ambitions of life returned. You were a mere girl from the East; you did not understand, nor care about the snobbery of army life. No,

it was not that — you were above it. You trusted me, treated me as a friend, almost as an equal. I loved you then, when we parted on the trail, but I went back to New Mexico to fight fate. It was such a hopeless dream, yet all summer long I rode with memory tugging at my heart. I grew to hate myself, but could never forget you."

She drew nearer, her hand upon his arm, her face uplifted.

"And you thought I did not care?"

"How could I dream you did?" almost bitterly. "You were gracious, kind — but you were a major's daughter, as far away from me as the stars. I never heard from you; not even a rumor of your whereabouts came to me across the plains. I supposed you had returned East; had passed out of my life forever. Then that night when we rode into Dodge I saw you again — saw you in the yellow lamp-light watching us pass, heard you ask what troops those were, and I knew instantly all my fighting out there in the desert had been vain — that you were forever the one, one woman."

"I remained for that," she confessed softly, her lashes wet.

"At Dodge?"

"Yes, at Dodge. I knew you would come, must come. Some intuition seemed to tell me that we should meet again. Oh, I was so happy the night you came! No one had told me your troop had been ordered in. It was like a dream come true. When I saw you leading your horse across the parade I could hardly refrain from calling out to you before them all. I did not care what they thought — for my soldier had come home from the wars."

"Sweetheart," the deep voice faltering, "may — may I kiss you?"

"Of course you may."

Their lips met, and she clung to him, as his arms held her closely. It was like a dream to him, this sudden, unexpected surrender. Perhaps she read this in his eyes.

"Do not misunderstand," she urged softly. "I do not come to you because of what has happened, because I am alone and helpless. If you had stepped from the ranks that night at Dodge, I would have answered even as I do now."

"You love me? — love me?" he repeated.

"Yes."

Even as he looked down into her upturned face,

there was borne back upon him a realization of their predicament. His eyes swept over the surrounding desolation, the two dead bodies lying motionless in the snow, the stiffening pony, the drear hillside which shut them in. The sight brought him back to consciousness with a shock. Minutes might mean much now. Dupont had disappeared over that ridge to the right, in the direction of Black Kettle's camp. How far away that might be was altogether guess-work, yet what would inevitably occur when the fugitive arrived among his friends, and told his story, could be clearly conceived. Even if the man believed Hamlin killed, he would recall to mind the girl, and would return to assure himself as to her fate. Knowing her helplessness, the practical impossibility of her escape alone, a return expedition might not be hurried, yet, beyond doubt, this isolated valley would have Indian visitors within a few hours. And when these discovered the truth they would be hot upon a trail where concealment was impossible. The only hope of escape, and that far from brilliant,— as he remembered the long desert ride from the distant cow-camp on the Cimarron,— lay in immediate departure. Every moment of delay served to increase their peril. Even beyond the danger

of Dupont's report to Black Kettle, this snow-bound valley was not so far away from that chief's camp as to be safe from invasion by young warriors in search of game. All this flashed upon Hamlin's consciousness instantly, even as his heart thrilled to her frank avowal.

"This is so strange I can hardly realize the truth," he said gravely. "But, dear one, we must talk elsewhere, and not here. Life was never before worth so much as it is now, and every instant we waste here may mean capture and death. Come, there are two ponies at the mouth of the valley."

He snatched up the blanket from the ground, and wrapped it about her in such manner as to enable her to walk; stooped over Hughes, loosened the revolver from his stiffened fingers, and then came back to where she waited.

"You can walk? It is not far."

"Yes, the numbness is all gone."

He was all seriousness now, alert and watchful, the plainsman and the soldier.

"Then come; I 'll break trail."

"Where is the Indian village?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"Beyond those bluffs; at least Hughes thought so.

We saw their pony herd in the valley below, mere dots against the snow."

Ten minutes later, ploughing through the intervening drifts, they came forth to the broad vista of the valley and the two patient ponies standing motionless.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MOLLY'S STORY

THE two rode steadily, following the trail left by Hamlin and Hughes earlier in the morning. As there had been no wind, and the cold had crusted the snow, the tracks left by the two ponies were easily followed. As they skirted the ridge the Indian pony herd could be distinguished, sufficiently close by this time to leave no doubt as to what they were. Hamlin cautiously kept back out of sight in the breaks of the ridge, although his keen eyes, searching the upper valley, discovered no sign of pursuit. Tired as Dupont's horse undoubtedly was, he might not yet have attained the Indian encampment, which, in truth, might be much farther away than Hughes had supposed. The fact that no spirals of smoke were visible puzzled the Sergeant, for in that frosty air they should naturally be perceived for a considerable distance. Possibly, however, the bluffs were higher and more abrupt, farther up stream, affording better chances of concealment. Indeed it was quite probable that the Indians would

seek the most sheltered spot available for their winter camp, irrespective of any possible fear of attack. Reasonably safe from a winter campaign, the atrocities of the past summer would naturally tend to make them unusually cautious and watchful.

Molly, muffled to the eyes in her thick blanket, permitted her pony to follow the other without guidance, until they both dipped down into the hollow, safe from any possible observation. In some mysterious way the overpowering feeling of terror which had controlled her for days past had departed. The mere presence of Hamlin was an assurance of safety. As she watched him, erect in saddle, his blue overcoat tightly buttoned, his revolver belt strapped outside, she no longer felt any consciousness of the surrounding desolation, or the nearness of savage foes. Her heart beat fast and her cheeks flushed in memory of what had so swiftly occurred between them. Without thought, or struggle, she gave herself unreservedly to his guidance, serenely confident in his power to succeed. He was a man so strong, so resourceful, so fitted to the environment, that her trust in him was unquestioned. She needed to ask nothing; was content to follow in silence. Even as she realized the completeness of her surrender, the Sergeant, relaxing none of his watchfulness,

checked his pony so that they could ride onward side by side.

"We will follow the trail back," he explained, glancing aside at her face. "It is easier to follow than to strike out for ourselves across the open."

"Where does it lead?"

"To an old cow-camp on the Cimarron. There is a trooper there waiting. Shall I tell you the story?"

"I wish you would."

"And then I am to have yours in return — everything?"

"Yes," she said, and their eyes met. "There is nothing to conceal — from you."

He told his tale simply, and in few words; how he had missed, and sought after her in Dodge; how that searching had led directly to the discovery of crime, and finally the revealment of Major McDonald's body. He told of his efforts at organizing a party to follow the fugitives, inspired by a belief that she was a prisoner, of the trip through the blizzard, and of how he had succeeded in outstripping Dupont in the race.

The girl listened silently, able from her own experience to fill in the details of that relentless pursuit, which could not be halted either by storm or bullets. The strength, the determination of the man, appealed

to her with new force, and tears welled into her eyes.

"Why, you are crying!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"That is nothing," her lips smiling, as she loosened one hand from the blanket and reached across to clasp his. "You must know, dear, how happy I am to have found you. No one else could have done this."

"Oh, yes, little girl," soberly. "Wasson would have gone on, if I had been the one to go down. The hardest part of it all was waiting for the storm to cease, not knowing where you were hidden — that nearly drove me insane."

"I understand; uncertainty is harder to bear than anything else. Shall I tell you now what happened to me?"

"Yes," tenderly, "as much, or as little as you please."

"Then it shall be everything, dear," her hand-grasp tightening. A moment she hesitated, looking out across the snow plains, and then back into his eyes. From their expression she gained courage to proceed, her voice low, yet clear enough to make every syllable distinctly audible.

"I — I was frightened when you left me alone on the balcony, and went in to confront Mrs. Dupont.

I knew the woman and suspected that she would only be too glad to find some indiscretion she could use against me. It occurred to me that possibly she had seen me enter the parlor and was there herself to make sure. If so, she would hesitate at no trick to verify her suspicions. This thought so took possession of me that I determined to escape if possible. And it appeared easy of accomplishment. There was but a short drop to the ground, while a few steps around the end of the hotel would bring me safely to the front entrance. The temptation to try was irresistible. I heard your voices within and thought I understood her game. It was dark below, yet I knew how close the earth was, and there was no sign of any one about. I clambered over the railing, let myself down as far as I could, and dropped. The slight fall did not even jar me, yet I was none too soon. As I crouched there in the darkness, she flung open the curtains, and looked out on to the vacant balcony. I saw the flash of light, and heard her laugh — it was not pleasant laughter, for she was disappointed not to find me there. After the curtains fell again I could no longer hear your voices, and my sole desire was to get back into the hotel unobserved. I was not afraid, only I dreaded to meet any one who might recognize me."

She paused in her recital, as though to recall more clearly the exact facts, the two riding forward, Hamlin leaning over toward her, occasionally glancing watchfully behind.

"The guests were already beginning to straggle back to the dance hall from supper, and I waited in the shadow of the building for an opportunity to slip into the hotel unobserved. While I hid there a cavalry soldier from the fort rode up, swung down from his saddle, and ran up the steps. I heard him ask for Major McDonald. Almost immediately he came out again, and I passed him on the porch. Just inside the door I met my father. He was leaving the hotel with Dupont, and the latter swore savagely when I caught my father's arm, asking what message the orderly had brought. He answered strangely, saying he had received orders to go at once to Ripley on the stage; that he might be gone several days. There was nothing about all that to startle a soldier's daughter, but Dupont kept his hand on my father's arm, urging him to hurry. The actions of the man aroused my suspicions. I knew my father was acting paymaster, and I could perceive the outlines of a leather bag bulging beneath his overcoat. If this contained money, then I grasped Dupont's purpose. My plan of action

occurred to me in a flash — I would accompany him until — until he was safely in the stage, and find opportunity to whisper warning. I remember asking him to wait a moment for me, and rushing to the cloak room after my coat. But when I returned they were gone. I ran out into the street, but they were not to be seen; they had not gone toward the stage office, for the lights revealed that distance clearly, and they had had no time in which to disappear within. With the one thought that Dupont had lured my father out of sight for purposes of robbery, I started to run down the little alley-way next the hotel. I know now how foolish I was, but then I was reckless. It was dark and I saw and heard nothing to warn me of danger. It was in my mind that my father had been lured on to the open prairie behind the hotel. Suddenly I was seized roughly, and a cloth whipped over my face before I could even scream. I heard a voice say: 'Damned if it ain't the girl! What will we do with her?' and then Dupont's voice answered gruffly: 'Hell, there ain't anything to do, but take the little hussy along. She 'd queer the whole game, an' we 've got an extra horse.' They jerked me forward so roughly, and I was so frightened that — that I must have fainted. At any rate I remember nothing more

distinctly until we had crossed the river, and I was on horseback wrapped in a blanket, and tied to the saddle. Some one was holding me erect; I could not move my arms, but could see and hear. It was dark, and we were moving slowly; there were two Indians ahead, and a white man riding each side of me. They thought me unconscious still, and spoke occasionally; little by little I recognized their voices, and understood their words."

Her voice broke into a sob, but the Sergeant's eyes were still gazing vigilantly out over the snow-clad hills.

"It is hard to tell the rest," she said finally, "but I learned that it was not robbery, but the betrayal of trust. My father was guilty, and yet at the same time a victim. I only got the truth in snatches, which I had to piece together, although later I learned other details. Mrs. Dupont had bled my father through some knowledge she had gained of his sister's family. I cannot even imagine what this could have been, but it was sufficient for her purpose. He gave her all he had, and then — then she heard of this government money being sent to Ripley. She had known about that for several days through the Lieutenant, and had ample time to arrange the plot. My father must have

been crazy to have entered into the scheme, but he did, he did. The woman compelled him to it."

"I understand, Molly," broke in Hamlin, anxious to spare her the details. "They were to pretend robbery, but with the Major's connivance. An officer impersonating him was despatched to Ripley by stage. This would prevent any immediate pursuit. Later the Major was to be released, to return to Dodge with his story. The projection of yourself into the affair disarranged the entire plot, and then a quarrel occurred, and your father was killed."

"Yes; it was over what should be done with me; although I believe now they intended to kill him, so as to retain all the money. The older Indian fired the shot treacherously."

"And Connors?"

"Dupont killed him; they were both drunk, and the soldier fired first, but missed."

"And after that?"

She covered her face with her hands.

"It was all a dream of continuous horror, yet through it all, I do not recall consciousness of physical torture. I seemed to be mentally numbed, my brain a blank. It was a realization of my father's guilt more than my own danger which affected me — that

and his death. They were not unkind nor brutal. Indeed I do not clearly recall that I was even spoken to, except when some necessary order was given. One night I heard them discuss what should be done with me; that I was to be hidden away in Black Kettle's camp. Generally Dupont spoke to the Indians in their own tongue, but that night he thought me asleep. I — I had no hope left — not even faith that you could ever rescue me."

Hamlin's hand clasped hers firmly, but his eyes were riveted on something in the distance.

"Wait," he said, checking his horse, "what is that? See; down in the valley of the creek! Is it not a moving body of men?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE ADVANCE OF CUSTER

THE Sergeant swung down from the saddle and forced both ponies back below the crest of the hill, his swift glance sweeping back over their trail. Then he gazed again searchingly into the valley below.

"What is it?" she questioned.

"A moving column of horsemen, soldiers from their formation, for Indians never march in column of fours. They are too far away for me to be certain yet. What troops can be away out here?"

"Was n't there to be a winter campaign against Black Kettle?" she questioned. "It was the rumor at Dodge. Perhaps —"

"Why, yes, that must be it," he interrupted eagerly. "Custer and the Seventh. What luck! And I'll be in it with the boys after all."

"Shall we not ride to meet them?"

"Soon, yes; only we need to be certain first."

"Are you not?" and she rose in her stirrups. "I

am sure they are cavalrymen. Now you can see clearly as they climb the hill."

"There is no doubt," he admitted, "a single troop ahead of the main body; the others will be beyond the bend in the stream."

He stepped back, where he could look directly into her face.

"They are soldiers all right, but that was not what I wanted to be so certain about. When we ride down there, Molly girl, we shall be swallowed up into the old life once more, the old army life."

"Yes."

"Perhaps you do not realize how different it will all be from out here alone together."

"Why should it be different?"

"I shall be again a soldier in the ranks, under orders, and you Major McDonald's daughter."

"But — but —" her eyes full of appeal.

"No, little girl," he explained quickly, reaching up and touching her gently; "we are never going to say anything about that to those down there — his comrades in arms. It is going to be our secret. I am glad you told me; it has brought us together as, perhaps, nothing else could, but there is no reason why the world should ever know. Let them think he died

defending his trust. Perhaps he did; what you overheard might have been said for a purpose, but, even if it were true, he had been driven to it by a merciless woman. It is ours to defend, not blacken his memory."

She bent slowly down until her cheek touched his.

"I — I thought you would say that," she returned slowly, "but what else you said is not so — there will never again be a barrier of rank between us." She straightened in the saddle, looking down into his eyes. "Whoever the officer may be in command of that detachment, I want you to tell him all."

"All?"

"Yes, that we are engaged; I am proud to have them know."

The truth was shining in her eyes, glowing on her cheeks. She leaned forward.

"Kiss me, and believe!"

"Molly, Molly," he whispered. "Never will I doubt again."

They could perceive the blue of the overcoats as they rode over the ridge, and at their sudden appearance the little column of horsemen came to a halt. Hamlin flung up one hand in signal, and the two urged their ponies down the side of the hill. Three men

spurred forth to meet them, spreading out slightly as though still suspicious of some trick, but, as they drew near, the leader suddenly waved his hand, and they dashed forward.

"Hamlin! Glad to see you again," the first rider greeted the Sergeant cordially. "Can this be Major McDonald's daughter."

"Yes, Major Elliott; I can repeat the story as we ride along, sir. You are the advance of Custer's expedition, I presume?"

"We are; the others are some miles behind, moving slowly so that the wagons can keep within touch. Wonderful the way those wagons have pushed ahead over the rough country. Have only missed camp twice since we left Dodge."

"When was that, sir?"

"Before the blizzard all except your troop were at Camp Supply; they had joined since, and it was then we heard about your trip down here. What became of your men, Sergeant?"

"Wasson and one private were killed, sir; the other private was frozen so badly I had to leave him in shelter on the Cimarron."

"By gad, it sounds interesting; and so you tackled the villains alone, and had some fight at that before

rescuing Miss McDonald. Well, the story will keep until we make camp again. However," and he bent low over the lady's hand, "I must congratulate Miss McDonald on her escaping without any serious injury."

"That is not all I should be congratulated upon, Major Elliott," she said quietly.

"No — eh — perhaps I do not understand."

"I desire that you shall; I refer to my engagement to Sergeant Hamlin."

The officer glanced in some bewilderment from her face to that of the silent trooper.

"You — you mean matrimonial?" he stammered, plainly embarrassed, unable so suddenly to grasp the peculiar situation. "Hamlin, what — what does this mean?"

"Miss Molly and I have known each other for some time," explained the Sergeant bluntly. "Out here alone we discovered we were more than friends. That is all, sir."

For an instant Elliott hesitated, held by the strange etiquette of rank, then the gentleman conquered the soldier, and he drew off his glove, and held out his hand.

"I can congratulate you, Miss McDonald," he

exclaimed frankly. "I have known Sergeant Hamlin for two years; he is a soldier and a gentleman."

The red blood swept into her cheeks, her eyes brightening.

"He is my soldier," she replied softly, "and the man I love."

They rode together down the steep hillside covered with its mantle of snow to join the little body of troopers halted in the valley. Only once did Elliott speak.

"You know Black Kettle's camp, Sergeant?"

"We were almost within sight of it, sir. I saw his pony herd distinctly."

"Where was that?"

"On the Canadian, close to the mouth of Buffalo Creek."

"Did you learn anything as to the number of Indians with him?"

"Nothing definite, but it is a large encampment, not all Cheyennes."

"So we heard, but were unable to discover the exact situation. We have been feeling our way forward cautiously. I fear it is going to be my unpleasant duty to separate you and Miss McDonald. We shall need your services as guide, and the lady will be far better off with the main column. Indeed some of the empty

wagons are to be sent back to Camp Supply to-night, and probably Custer will deem it best that she return with them. This winter campaigning is going to be rough work, outside of the fighting. You know Custer, and his style; besides Sheridan is himself at Camp Supply in command."

"You hear, Molly?"

"Yes; of course, I will do whatever General Custer deems best. Are there any women at Camp Supply, Major?"

"Yes, a few; camp women mostly, although there may be also an officer's wife or two — 19th Kansas volunteers."

"Then it will be best for me to go there, if I can," she smiled. "I am desperately in need of clothes."

"I suspected as much. I will arrange to give you a guard at once. And you, Sergeant? As you are still under special orders, I presume I have no authority to detain you in my command."

"I prefer to remain, sir," grimly. "Dupont, Miss McDonald's captor, is alive and in Black Kettle's camp. We still have a feud to settle."

"Good; then that is arranged; ah, Miss McDonald, allow me to present Lieutenant Chambers. Lieutenant, detail three men to guard the lady back to the

main column. Have her taken to General Custer at once."

"Very well, sir; and the command?"

Elliott looked at the Sergeant inquiringly.

"That is for Sergeant Hamlin to determine; he has just been scouting through that country, and will act as guide."

The Sergeant stood for a moment motionless beside his horse studying the vista of snow-draped hillside. The region beyond the crest of the ridge unrolled before his memory.

"Then we will keep directly on up this valley, sir," he said at last. "It's Wolf Creek, is it not? We shall be safer to keep out of sight to-day, and this depression must lead toward the Canadian. May I exchange mounts with one of those men going back, Major? I fear my pony is about done."

"Certainly."

There was no opportunity for anything save a simple grasp of the hand, ere Molly rode away with her escort. Then the little column of troopers moved on, and Hamlin, glancing backward as he rode past, took his place in advance beside Major Elliott.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE INDIAN TRAIL

THE weather became colder as the day advanced. Scattered pellets of snow in the air lashed the faces of the troopers, who rode steadily forward, the capes of their overcoats thrown over their heads for protection. The snow of the late storm lay in drifts along the banks of the narrow stream, and the horses picked their passage higher up where the wind had swept the brown earth clear, at the same time keeping well below the crest. As they thus toiled slowly forward, Hamlin related his story to the Major in detail, carefully concealing all suspicion of McDonald's connection with the crime. It was growing dusk when the company emerged into the valley of the Canadian. All about them was desolation and silence, and as they were still miles away from the position assigned for Black Kettle's encampment, the men were permitted to build fires and prepare a warm meal under shelter of the bluffs. Two hours later the main column arrived and also went into camp. It was

intensely cold but the men were cheerful as they ate their supper of smoky and half-roasted buffalo meat, bacon, hard-tack, and coffee.

In response to orders the Sergeant went down the line of tiny fires to report in person to Custer. He found that commander ensconced in a small tent, hastily erected in a little grove of cottonwoods, which afforded a slight protection from the piercing wind. Before him on the ground from which the snow had been swept lay a map of the region, while all about, pressed tightly into the narrow quarters, were his troop officers. As Hamlin was announced by the orderly, conversation ceased, and Custer surveyed the newcomer an instant in silence.

"Step forward, Sergeant," he said quietly. "Ah, yes; I had forgotten your name, but remember your face," he smiled about on the group. "We have been so scattered since our organization, gentlemen, that we are all comparative strangers." He stood up, lifting in one hand a tin cup of coffee. "Gentlemen, all we of the Seventh rejoice in the honor of the service, whether it be upheld by officer or enlisted man. I bid you drink a toast with me to Sergeant Hamlin."

"But, General, I have done nothing to deserve —"

"Observe the modesty of a real hero. Yet wait

until I am through. With due regard for his achievements as a soldier, I propose this toast in commemoration of a greater deed of gallantry than those of arms — the capture of Miss Molly McDonald!"

There was a quick uplifting of cups, a burst of laughter, and a volley of questions, the Sergeant staring about motionless, his face flushed.

"What is it, General?"

"Tell us the story!"

"Give us the joke!"

"But I assure you it is no joke. I have it direct from the fair lips of the lady. Brace yourselves, gentlemen, for the shock. You young West Pointers lose, and yet the honor remains with the regiment. Miss Molly McDonald, the toast of old Fort Dodge, whose bright eyes have won all your hearts, has given hers to Sergeant Hamlin of the Seventh. And now again, boys, to the honor of the regiment!"

Out of the buzz of conversation and the hearty words of congratulation, Hamlin emerged bewildered, finding himself again facing Custer, whose manner had as swiftly changed into the brusque note of command.

"I have met you before, Sergeant," he said slowly, "before your assignment to the Seventh, I think. I am not sure where; were you in the Shenandoah?"

"I was, sir."

"At Winchester?"

"I saw you first at Cedar Creek, General Custer; I brought a flag."

"That 's it; I have the incident clearly before me now. You were a lieutenant-colonel?"

"Of the Fourth Texas, sir."

"Exactly; I think I heard later — but never mind that now. Sheridan remembers you; he even mentioned your name to me a few weeks ago. No doubt that was what caused me to recognize your face again after all these years. How long have you been in our service?"

"Ever since the war closed."

For a moment the two men looked into each others' faces, the commander smiling, the enlisted man at respectful attention.

"I will talk with you at some future time, Sergeant," Custer said at last, resuming his seat on a log. "Now we shall have to consider the to-morrow's march. Were you within sight of Black Kettle's camp?"

"No, sir; only of his pony herd out in the valley of the Canadian."

"Where would you suppose the camp situated?"

"Above, behind the bluffs, about the mouth of Buffalo Creek."

Custer drew the map toward him, scrutinizing it carefully.

"You may be right, of course," he commented, his glance on the faces of the officers, "but this does not agree with the understanding at Camp Supply, nor the report of our Indian scouts. We supposed Black Kettle to be farther south on the Washita. How large was the pony herd?"

"We were not near enough to count the animals, sir, but there must have been two hundred head."

"A large party then, at least. What do you say, Corbin?"

The scout addressed, conspicuous in his buffalo skin coat, leaned against the tent-pole, his black whiskers moving industriously as he chewed.

"Wal, Gineral," he said slowly, "I know this yere 'Brick' Hamlin, an' he 's a right smart plainsman, sojer 'er no sojer. If he says he saw thet pony herd, then he sure did. Thet means a considerable bunch o' Injuns thar, er tharabouts. Now I know Black Kettle's outfit is down on the Washita, so the only conclusion is that this yere band thet the Sergeant stirred up is some new tribe er other, a-driftin' down

frum the north. I reckon if we ride up ther valley we 'll hit their trail, an' it 'll lead straight down to them Cheyennes."

Custer took time to consider this explanation, spreading the field map out on his knees, and measuring the distance between the streams. No one in the little group spoke, although several leaned forward eagerly. The chief was not a man to ask advice; he preferred to decide for himself. Suddenly he straightened up and threw back his head to look about.

"In my judgment Corbin is right, gentlemen," he said impetuously. "I had intended crossing here, but instead we will go further up stream. There is doubtless a ford near Buffalo Creek, and if we can strike an Indian trail leading to the Washita, we can follow easily by night, or day, and it is bound to terminate at Black Kettle's camp. Return to your troops, and be ready to march at daybreak. Major Elliott, you will take the advance again, at least three hours ahead of the main column. Move with caution, your flankers well out; both Hamlin and Corbin will go with you. Are there any questions?"

"Full field equipment?" asked a voice.

"Certainly, although in case of going into action

the overcoats will be discarded. Look over your ammunition carefully to-night."

They filed out of the tent one by one, some of the older officers pausing a moment to speak with Hamlin, his own captain extending his hand cordially, with a warm word of commendation. The Sergeant and Major Elliott alone remained.

"If I strike a fresh trail, General," asked the latter, "am I to press forward or wait for the main body?"

"Send back a courier at once, but advance cautiously, careful not to expose yourselves. There is to be no attack except in surprise, and with full force. This is important, Major, as we are doubtless outnumbered, ten to one. Was there something else, Sergeant?"

"I was going to ask about Miss McDonald, sir."

"Oh, yes; she is safely on her way to Camp Supply, under ample guard. The convoy was to stop on the Cimarron, and pick up the frozen soldier you left there, and if possible, find the bodies of the two dead men."

Long before daylight Elliott's advance camp was under arms, the chilled and sleepy troopers moving

forward through the drifted snow of the north bank; the wintry wind, sweeping down the valley, stung their faces and benumbed their bodies. The night had been cold and blustery, productive of little comfort to either man or beast, but hope of early action animated the troopers and made them oblivious to hardship. There was little grumbling in the ranks, and by daybreak the head of the long column came opposite the opening into the valley wherein Hamlin had overtaken the fugitives. With Corbin beside him, the Sergeant spurred his pony aside, but there was little to see; the bodies of the dead lay as they had fallen, black blotches on the snow, but there were no fresh trails to show that either Dupont, or any Indian ally, had returned to the spot.

"That 's evidence enough, 'Brick,'" commented the scout, staring about warily, "that thar wus no permanent camp over thar," waving his hand toward the crest of the ridge. "Them redskins was on the march, an' that geezer had ter follow 'em, er else starve ter death. He 'd a bin back afore this, an' on yer trail with a bunch o' young bucks."

From the top of the ridge they could look down on the toiling column of cavalrymen below in the bluff shadow, and gaze off over the wide expanse of valley,

through which ran the half-frozen Canadian. Everywhere stretched the white, wintry desolation.

"Whar wus thet pony herd?"

Hamlin pointed up the valley to the place where the swerve came in the stream.

"Just below that point; do you see where the wind has swept the ground bare?"

"Sure they were n't buffalo?"

"They were ponies all right, and herded."

The two men spurred back across the hills, and made report to Elliott. There was no hesitancy in that officer. The leading squadron was instantly swung into formation as skirmishers, and sent forward. From river-bank to crest of bluff they ploughed through the drifts, overcoats strapped behind and carbines flung forward in readiness for action, but as they climbed to that topmost ridge, eager, expectant, it was only to gaze down upon a deserted camp, trampled snow, and blackened embers of numerous fires. Hamlin was the first to scramble down the steep bluff, dismount, and drag his trembling horse sliding after. Behind plunged Corbin and Elliott, anxious to read the signs, to open the pages of this wilderness book. A glance here and there, a testing of the blackened embers, a few steps along the broad trail, and these

plainsmen knew the story. The Major straightened up, his hand on his horse's neck, his eyes sweeping those barren plains to the southward, and then turned to where his troopers were swarming down the bluff.

"Corbin," he said sharply, "ride back to General Custer at top speed. Tell him we have discovered a Cheyenne camp here at the mouth of Buffalo Creek of not less than a hundred and fifty warriors, deserted, and not to exceed twenty-four horses. Their trail leads south toward the Washita. Report that we shall cross the river in pursuit at once, and keep on cautiously until dark. Take a man with you; no, not Sergeant Hamlin, I shall need him here."

The scout was off like a shot, riding straight down the valley, a trooper pounding along behind him. Major Elliott ran his eyes over the little bunch of cavalrymen.

"Captain Sparling, send two of your men to test the depth of water there where those Indians crossed. As soon as ascertained we will ford the river."

. . .

CHAPTER XXXVI

READY TO ATTACK

THERE was a ford but it was rocky and dangerous, and so narrow that horse after horse slipped aside into the swift current, bearing his rider with him into the icy water. Comrades hauled the unfortunate ones forth, and fires were hastily built under shelter of the south bank. Those who reached the landing dry shared their extra clothing with those water-soaked, and hot coffee was hastily served to all alike. Eager as the men were to push forward, more than an hour was lost in passage, for the stream was bank full, the current rapid and littered with quantities of floating ice. Some of these ice cakes startled the struggling horses and inflicted painful wounds, and it was only by a free use of ropes and lariats that the entire command finally succeeded in attaining the southern shore. Shivering with the cold, the troopers again found their saddles and pressed grimly forward on the trail. Hamlin, with five others, led the way along a beaten track which had been trampled by the

passing herd of Indian ponies and plainly marked by the trailing poles of numerous wicky-ups.

This led straight away into the south across the valley of the Canadian, on to the plains beyond. The snow here was a foot deep on a level, and in places the going was heavy. As they advanced, the weather moderated somewhat, and the upper crust became soft. Before them stretched the dreary level of the plains, broken by occasional ravines and little isolated patches of trees. No sign of Indians was seen other than the deserted trail, and confident that the band had had fully twenty-four hours' start their pursuers advanced as rapidly as the ground would permit. The very clearness of the trail was evidence that the Indians had no conception that they were being followed. Confident of safety in their winter retreat, they were making no effort to protect their rear, never dreaming there were soldiers within hundreds of miles. Whatever report Dupont had made, it had awakened no alarm. Why should it? So far as he knew there were but two men pursuing him into the wilderness, and both of these he believed lying dead in the snow.

Steadily, mile after mile, they rode, and it was after dark when the little column was finally halted beside a stream, where they could safely hide themselves in

a patch of timber. Tiny fires were built under protection of the steep banks of the creek, and the men made coffee, and fed their hungry horses. The silence was profound. It was a dark night, although the surrounding snow plains yielded a spectral light. Major Elliott, drinking coffee and munching hard-tack with the troop captain, sent for Sergeant Hamlin. The latter advanced within the glow of the fire, and saluted.

"We have been gaining on those fellows, Sergeant," the Major began, "and must be drawing close to the Washita."

"We are travelling faster than they did, sir," was the reply, "because they had to break trail, and there were some women and children with them. I have no knowledge of this region, but the creek empties into the Washita without doubt."

"That would be my judgment. Sparling and I were just talking it over. I shall wait here until Custer comes up; my force is too small to attack openly, and my orders are not to bring on an engagement. Custer has some Osage scouts with him who will know this country."

"But, Major," ventured Hamlin, "if the General follows our trail it will be hours yet before he can

reach here, and then his men will be completely exhausted."

"He will not follow our trail. He has Corbin and 'California Joe' with him. They are plainsmen who know their business. He 'll cross the Canadian, and strike out across the plains to intercept us. In that way he will have no farther to travel than we have had. In my judgment we shall not wait here long alone. Have you eaten?"

"No, sir; I have been stationing the guard."

"Then sit down here and share what little we have. We can waive formality to-night."

It was after nine o'clock when the sentries challenged the advance of Custer's column, as it stole silently out of the gloom. Ten minutes later the men were hovering about the fires, absorbing such small comforts as were possible, while the General and Major Elliott discussed the situation and planned to push forward. An hour later the fires were extinguished, the horses quietly saddled, and noiselessly the tired cavalrymen moved out once more and took up the trail. The moon had risen, lighting up the desert, and the Osage guides, together with the two scouts, led the way. At Custer's request Hamlin rode beside him in lead of the troopers. Not a word was spoken above

a whisper, and strict orders were passed down the line prohibiting the lighting of a match or the smoking of a pipe. Canteens were muffled and swords thrust securely under saddle flaps. Like a body of spectres they moved silently across the snow in the moonlight, cavalry capes drawn over their heads, the only sound the crunching of horses' hoofs breaking through the crust.

The trail was as distinct as a road, and the guides pushed ahead as rapidly as by daylight, yet with ever increasing caution. Suddenly one of the Osages signalled for a halt, averring that he smelled fire. The scouts dismounted and crept forward, discovering a small campfire, deserted but still smouldering, in a strip of timber. Careful examination made it certain that this fire must have been kindled by Indian boys, herding ponies during the day, and probably meant that the village was very close at hand. The Osage guides and the two white scouts again picked up the trail, the cavalry advancing slowly some distance behind. Custer, accompanied by Hamlin, rode a yard to the rear and joined the scouts, who were cautiously feeling their way up a slight declivity.

The Osage in advance crept through the snow to the crest of the ridge and looked carefully down into

the valley below. Instantly his hand went up in a gesture of caution and he hurriedly made his cautious way back to where Custer sat his horse waiting.

"What is it? What did you see?"

"Heap Injuns down there!"

The General swung down from his saddle, motioned the Sergeant to follow, and the two men crept to the crest and looked over. The dim moonlight was confusing, while the shadow of timber rendered everything indistinct. Yet they were able to make out a herd of ponies, distinguished the distant bark of a dog and the tinkle of a bell. Without question this was the Indians' winter camp, and they had reached it undiscovered. Custer glanced at his watch — the hour was past midnight. He pressed Hamlin's sleeve, his lips close to the Sergeant's ear.

"Creep back, and bring my officers up here," he whispered. "Have them take off their sabres."

As they crept, one after the other, to where he lay in the snow, the General, whose eyes had become accustomed to the moon-gleam, pointed out the location of the village and such natural surroundings as could be vaguely distinguished. The situation thus outlined in their minds, they drew silently back from the crest, leaving there a single Osage guide on guard,

and returned to the waiting regiment, standing to horse less than a mile distant. Custer's orders for immediate attack came swiftly, and Hamlin, acting as his orderly, bore them to the several commands. The entire force was slightly in excess of eight hundred men, and there was every probability that the Indians outnumbered them five to one. Scouts had reported to Sheridan that this camp of Black Kettle's was the winter rendezvous not only of Cheyennes, but also of bands of fighting Arapahoes, Kiowas, Comanches, and even some Apaches, the most daring and desperate warriors of the plains. Yet this was no time to hesitate, to debate; it was a moment for decisive action. The blow must be struck at once, before daylight, with all the power of surprise.

The little body of cavalrymen was divided into four detachments. Two of these were at once marched to the left, circling the village silently in the darkness, and taking up a position at the farther extremity. A third detachment moved to the right, and found their way down into the valley, where they lay concealed in a strip of timber. Custer, with the fourth detachment under his own command, remained in position on the trail. The sleeping village was thus completely surrounded, and the orders were for those in command of

the different forces to approach as closely as possible without running risk of discovery, and then to remain absolutely quiet until daybreak. Not a match was to be lighted nor a shot fired until the charge was sounded by the trumpeter who remained with Custer. Then all were to spur forward as one man.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE BATTLE WITH THE INDIANS

CORBIN had gone with the detachment circling to the left, and "California Joe" was with the other in the valley, but Hamlin remained with the chief. About them was profound silence, the men standing beside their horses. There was nothing to do but wait, every nerve at high tension. The wintry air grew colder, but the troopers were not allowed to make the slightest noise, not even to swing their arms or stamp their feet. After the last detachment swept silently out into the night, there still remained four hours until daylight. No one knew what had occurred; the various troops had melted away into the dark and disappeared. No word, no sound had come back. They could only wait in faith on their comrades. The men were dismounted, each one holding his own horse in instant readiness for action. Not a few, wearied with the day's work, while still clinging to their bridles, wrapped the capes of their overcoats

over their heads and threw themselves down in the snow, and fell asleep.

At the first sight of dawn Hamlin was sent down the line to arouse them. Overcoats were taken off, and strapped to the saddles, carbines loaded and slung, pistols examined and loosened in their holsters, saddles recinched, and curb chains carefully looked after. This was the work of but a few moments, the half-frozen soldiers moving with an eagerness that sent the hot blood coursing fiercely through numbed limbs. To the whispered command to mount, running from lip to lip along the line, the men sprang joyously into their saddles, their quickened ears and eager eyes ready for the signal.

Slowly, at a walk, Custer led them forward toward the crest of the hill, where the Osage guide watched through the spectral light of dawn the doomed village beneath. To the uplift of a hand the column halted, and Custer and his bugler went forward. A step behind crouched the Sergeant, grasping the reins of three horses, while a little to the right, beyond the sweep of the coming charge, waited the regimental band.

Peering over the crest, the leader saw through the dim haze, scarcely five hundred yards distant, dotting the north bank of the Washita for more than a quarter

of a mile, the Indian village. There was about it scarcely a sign of human life. From the top of two or three of the tepees light wreaths of smoke floated languidly out on the wintry air, and beyond the pony herd was restlessly moving. Even as he gazed, half convinced that the Indians had been warned, the village deserted, the sharp report of a rifle rang out in the distance.

Hamlin saw the General spring upright, his lips uttering the sharp command, *"Sound the charge!"* Even while the piercing blare of the bugle cut the frosty air, there was a jingle of steel as the troopers behind spurred forward. Almost at the instant the three dismounted men were in saddle. Custer waved his hand at the band, shouted "Play!" and to the rollicking air of "Garry Owen," the eager column of horsemen broke into a mad gallop, and with ringing cheers and mighty rush, swept over the ridge straight down into the startled village. To Hamlin, at Custer's side, reins in his teeth, a revolver in either hand, what followed was scarcely a memory. It remained afterward as a blurred, indistinct picture of action, changing so rapidly as to leave no definite outlines. He heard the answering call of three bugles; the deafening thud of horses' hoofs; the converging cheers

of excited troopers; the mingling ring of revolver shots; a sharp order cleaving the turmoil; the wild neigh of a stricken horse; the guttural yells of Indians leaping from their tepees into the open. Then he was in the heart of the village, firing with both hands; before him, about him, half-naked savages fighting desperately, striking at him with knives, firing from the shelter of tepees, springing at him with naked hands in a fierce effort to drag him from the saddle. It was all confusion, chaos, a babble of noise, his eyes blinded by glint of steel and glare of fire. The impetus of their rush carried them irresistibly forward; over and through tents they rode, across the bodies of living and dead; men reeled and fell from saddle; riderless horses swept on unguided; revolvers emptied were flung aside, and hands closed hard on sabre hilts. Foot by foot, yard by yard, they drove the wedge of their charge, until they swept through the fringe of tepees, out into the stampeded pony herd.

The bugle rang again, and they turned, facing back, and charged once more, no longer in close formation, but every trooper fighting as he could. Complete as the surprise had been, the men of the Seventh realized now the odds against them, the desperate nature of the

fight. Out from the sheltering tepees poured a flood of warriors; rifles in hand they fought savagely. The screams of women and children, the howling and baying of Indian dogs, the crack of rifles, the wild war cries, all mingled into an indescribable din. Black Kettle was almost the first to fall, but other chiefs rallied their warriors, and fought like fiends, yielding ground only by inches, until they found shelter amid the trees, and under the river bank.

In the cessation of hand to hand fighting the detachments came together, reforming their ranks, and reloading their arms. Squads of troopers fired the tepees, and gathering their prisoners under guard, hastened back to the ranks again at the call of the bugle. By now Custer comprehended his desperate position, and the full strength of his Indian foes. Fresh hordes were before him, already threatening attack. Hamlin, bleeding from two flesh wounds, rode in from the left flank where he had been borne by the impetus of the last charge, with full knowledge of the truth. Their attack had been centred on Black Kettle's village, but below, a mile or two apart, were other villages, representing all the hostile tribes of the southern plains. Already these were hurrying up to join those rallying warriors under shelter of the river

bank. Even from where Custer stood at the outskirts of the devastated village he could distinguish the warbonnets of Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas and Comanches mingled together in display of savagery.

His decision was instant, that of the impetuous cavalry leader, knowing well the inherent strength and weakness of his branch of the service. He could not hope to hold his position before such a mass of the enemy, with the little force at his disposal. His only chance of escape, to come off victor, was to strike them so swiftly and with such force as to paralyze pursuit. Already the reinforcing warriors were sweeping forward to attack, two thousand strong, led fiercely by Little Raven, an Arapahoe; Santanta, a Kiowa, and Little Rock, a Cheyenne. Dismounting his men he prepared for a desperate resistance, although the troopers' ammunition was running low. Suddenly, crashing through the very Indian lines, came a four-mule wagon. The quartermaster was on the box, driving recklessly. Only Hamlin and a dozen other men were still in saddle. Without orders they dashed forward, spurring maddened horses into the ranks of the Indians, hurling them left and right, firing into infuriated red faces, and slashing about with dripping sabres. Into the lane thus formed sprang the

tortured mules, sweeping on with their precious load of ammunition. Behind closed in the squad of rescuers, struggling for their lives amid a horde of savages. Then, with one wild shout, the dismounted troopers leaped to the rescue, hurling back the disorganized Indian mass, and dragging their comrades from the rout. It was hand to hand, clubbed carbine against knife and spear, a fierce, breathless struggle. Behind eager hands ripped open the ammunition cases; cartridges were jammed into empty guns, and a second line of fighting men leaped forward, their front tipped with fire.

Dragged from his horse at the first fierce shock, his revolver empty, his broken sabre a jagged piece of steel, Hamlin hacked his way through the first line of warriors, and found refuge behind a dead horse. Here, with two others, he made a stand, gripping a carbine. It was all the work of a moment. About him were skurrying figures, infuriated faces, threatening weapons, yells of agony, cries of rage. The three fought like fiends, standing back to back, and striking blindly at leaping bodies and clutching hands. Out of the mist, the mad confusion of breathless combat, one face alone seemed to confront the Sergeant. At first it was a delirium; then it became a reality. He

saw the shagginess of a buffalo coat, the gleam of a white face. All else vanished in a fierce desire to kill. He leaped forward, crazed with sudden hate, hurled aside the naked bodies in the path, and sent his whirling carbine stock crashing at Dupont. Even as it struck he fell, clutched by gripping hands, and over all rang out the cheer of the charging troopers. Hamlin staggered to his knees, spent and breathless, and smiled grimly down at the dead white man in that ring of red.

It was over, yet that little body of troopers dared not remain. About them still, although demoralized and defeated, circled an overwhelming mass of savages capable of crushing them to death, when they again rallied and consolidated. Custer did the only thing possible. Turning loose the pony herd, gathering his captives close, he swung his compact command into marching column. Before the scattered tribes could rally for a second attack, with flankers out, and skirmishers in advance, the cavalrymen rode straight down the valley toward the retreating hostiles. It was a bold and desperate move, the commander's object being to impress upon the Indian chiefs the thought of his utter fearlessness, and to create the impression that the Seventh would never dare such a thing if they

did not have a larger force behind. With flags unfurled, and the band playing, the troopers swept on. The very mad audacity of the movement struck terror into the hearts of the warriors, and they broke and fled. As darkness fell the survivors of the Seventh rode alone, amid the silent desolation of the plains.

Halting a moment for rest under shelter of the river bank, Custer hastily wrote his report and sent for Hamlin. The latter approached and stood motionless in the red glare of the single camp-fire. The impetuous commander glanced up inquiringly.

"Sergeant, I must send a messenger to Camp Supply. Are you fit to go?"

"As much so as any one, General Custer," was the quiet response. "I have no wounds of consequence."

"Very well. Take the freshest horse in the command, and an Osage guide. You know the country, but he will be of assistance. I have written a very brief report; you are to tell Sheridan personally the entire story. We shall rest here two hours, and then proceed slowly along the trail. I anticipate no further serious fighting. You will depart at once."

"Very well, sir," the Sergeant saluted, and turned away, halting an instant to ask, "You have reported the losses, I presume?"

"Yes, the dead and wounded. There are some missing, who may yet come in. Major Elliott and fourteen others are still unaccounted for." He paused. "By the way, Sergeant, while you are with Sheridan, explain to him who you are — he may have news for you. Good-night, and good luck."

He stood up and held out his hand. In surprise, his eyes suddenly filling with tears, Hamlin felt the grip of his fingers. Then he turned, unable to articulate a sentence, and strode away into the night.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

AT CAMP SUPPLY

THERE are yet living in that great Southwest those who will retell the story of Hamlin's ride from the banks of the Washita to Camp Supply. It remains one of the epics of the plains, one of the proud traditions of the army. To the man himself those hours of danger, struggle and weariness, were more a dream than a reality. He passed through them almost unconsciously, a soldier performing his duty in utter forgetfulness of self, nerved by the discipline of years of service, by the importance of his mission, and by memory of Molly McDonald. Love and duty held him reeling in the saddle, brought him safely to the journey's end.

Let the details pass unwritten. Beneath the darkening skies of early evening, the Sergeant and the Osage guide rode forth into the peril and mystery of the shrouded desert. Beyond the outmost picket, moving as silently as two spectres, they found at last a coulee leading upward from the valley to the plains

above. To their left the Indian fires swept in half circle, and between were the dark outlines of savage foes. From rock to rock echoed guttural voices, but, foot by foot, unnoted by the keen eyes, the two crept steadily on through the midnight of that sheltering ravine, dismounted, hands clasping the nostrils of their ponies, feeling through the darkness for each step, halting breathless at every crackle of a twig, every crunch of snow under foot. Again and again they paused, silent, motionless, as some apparition of savagery outlined itself between them and the sky, yet slowly, steadily, every instinct of the plains exercised, they passed unseen.

In the earliest gray of dawn the two wearied men crept out upon the upper plateau, dragging their horses. Behind, the mists of the night still hung heavy and dark over the valley, yet with a new sense of freedom they swung into their saddles, faced sternly the chill wind of the north, and rode forward across the desolate snow fields. It was no boys' play! The tough, half-broken Indian ponies kept steady stride, leaping the drifts, skimming rapidly along the bare hillsides. From dawn to dark scarcely a word was uttered. By turns they slept in the saddle, the one awake gripping the others' rein. Once, in a strip of

cottonwood, beside a frozen creek, they paused to light a fire and make a hasty meal. Then they were off again, facing the frosty air, riding straight into the north. Before them stretched the barren snow-clad steppes, forlorn and shelterless, with scarcely a mark of guidance anywhere, a dismal wilderness, intersected by gloomy ravines and frozen creeks. Here and there a river, the water icy cold and covered with floating ice, barred their passage; down in the valleys the drifted snow turned them aside. Again and again the struggling ponies floundered to their ears, or slid headlong down some steep declivity. Twice Hamlin was thrown, and once the Osage was crushed between floating cakes and submerged in the icy stream. Across the open barrens swept the wind into their faces, a ceaseless buffeting, chilling to the marrow; their eyes burned in the snow-glare. Yet they rode on and on, voiceless, suffering in the grim silence of despair, fit denizens of that scene of utter desolation.

At the Cimarron the half-frozen Indian collapsed, falling from his saddle into the snow utterly exhausted. Staggering himself like a drunken man, the Sergeant dragged the nerveless body into a crevice of the bluff out of the wild sweep of the wind, trampled aside the snow into a wall of shelter, built a hasty fire, and

poured hot coffee between the shivering lips. With the earliest gray of another dawn, the white man caught the strongest pony, and rode on alone. He never knew the story of those hours — only that his trail led straight into the north. He rode erect at first, then leaning forward clinging to the mane; now and then he staggered along on foot dragging his pony by the rein. Once he stopped to eat, breaking the ice in a creek for water. It began to snow, the thick fall of flakes blotting out the horizon, leaving him to stumble blindly through the murk. Then darkness came, wrapping him in a cloak of silence in the midst of that unspeakable desert. His limbs stiffened, his brain reeled from intense fatigue. He dragged himself back into the saddle, pressing the pony into a slow trot. Suddenly out of the wall of gloom sprang the yellow lights of Camp Supply. Beneath these winking eyes of guidance there burst the red glare of a fire. Even as he saw it the pony fell, but the exhausted man had forgotten now everything but duty. The knowledge that he had won the long struggle brought him new strength. He wrenched his feet free from the stirrups, and ran forward, calling to the guard. They met him, and he stood straight before them, every nerve taut — a soldier.

"I bring despatches from Custer," he said slowly, holding himself firm. "Take me to General Sheridan."

The corporal walked beside him, down the trampled road, questioning eagerly as they passed the line of shacks toward the double log house where the commander was quartered. Hamlin heard, and answered briefly, yet was conscious only of an effort to retain his strength. Once within, he saw only the short, sturdy figure sitting behind a table, the shaggy gray beard, the stern, questioning eyes which surveyed him. He stood there straight, motionless, his uniform powdered with snow, his teeth clinched so as not to betray weakness, his face roughened by exposure, grimy with dirt, and disfigured by a week's growth of beard. Sheridan stared at him, shading his eyes from the glow of the lamp.

"You are from Custer?"

"Yes, sir."

He drew the papers from within his overcoat, stepped forward and laid them on the table. Sheridan placed one hand upon them, but did not remove his gaze from Hamlin's face.

"When did you leave?"

"The evening of the 27th, sir. I was sent back with an Osage guide to bring you this report."

"And the guide?"

"He gave out on the Cimarron and I came on alone."

"And Custer? Did he strike Black Kettle?"

"We found his camp the evening of the 26th, and attacked at daybreak the next morning. There were more Indians with him than we expected to find — between two and three thousand, warriors from all the southern tribes. Their tepees were set up for ten miles along the Washita. We captured Black Kettle's village, and destroyed it; took his pony herd, and released a number of white prisoners, including some women and children. There was a sharp fight, and we lost quite a few men; I left too early to learn how many."

"And the command — is it in any danger?"

"I think not, sir. General Custer was confident he could retire safely. The Indians were thoroughly whipped, and apparently had no chief under whom they could rally."

The General opened the single sheet of paper, and ran his eyes slowly down the lines of writing. Ham-

lin, feeling his head reel giddily, reached out silently and grasped the back of a chair in support. Sheridan glanced up.

"General Custer reports Major Elliott as missing and several officers badly wounded."

"Yes, sir."

"What Indians were engaged, and under what chiefs?"

"Mostly Cheyennes, although there were bands of Arapahoes, Kiowas, Comanches, and a few Apaches. Little Rock was in command after Black Kettle was killed — that is of the Cheyennes. Little Raven, and Santanta led the others."

"A fiend, that last. But, Sergeant, you are exhausted. I will talk with you to-morrow. The officer of the day will assign you quarters."

Hamlin, still clinging to the chair with one hand, lifted the other in salute.

"General Sheridan," he said, striving to control his voice, "General Custer's last words to me were that I was to tell you who I am. I do not know what he meant, but he said you would have news for me."

"Indeed!" in surprise, stiffening in his chair.

"Yes, sir — my name is Hamlin."

"Hamlin! Hamlin!" the General repeated the

word. "I have no recollection — why, yes, by Gad! You were a Confederate colonel."

"Fourth Texas Infantry."

"That's it! I have it now; you were court-martialed after the affair at Fisher's Hill, and dismissed from the service — disobedience of orders, or something like that. Wait a minute."

He rapped sharply on the table, and the door behind, leading into the other room, instantly opened to admit the orderly. In the dim light of the single lamp Hamlin saw the short, stocky figure of a soldier, bearded, and immaculately clean. Even as the fellow's gloved hand came sharply up to his cap visor, Sheridan snapped out:

"Orderly, see if you recognize this man."

Erect, the very impersonation of military discipline, the soldier crossed the room, and stared into the unshaven face of the Sergeant. Suddenly his eyes brightened, and he wheeled about as if on a pivot, again bringing his gloved hand up in salute.

"Eet vas Colonel Hamlin, I tink ya," he said in strong German accent. "I know heem."

The Sergeant gripped his arm, bringing his face about once more.

"You are Shultz — Sergeant-Major Shultz!" he

cried. "What ever became of you? What is it you know?"

"Wait a minute, Hamlin," said Sheridan quickly, rising to his feet. "I can explain this much better than that Dutchman. He means well enough, but his tongue twists. It seems Custer met you once in the Shenandoah, and later heard of your dismissal from the service. One night he spoke about the affair in my quarters. Shultz was present on duty and overheard. He spoke up like a little man; said he was there when you got your orders, that they were delivered verbally by the staff officer, and he repeated them for us word for word. He was taken prisoner an hour later, and never heard of your court-martial. Is that it, Shultz?"

"Mine Gott, ya; I sa dot alreatty," fervently. "He tell you not recoinnoisance — *charge!* I heard eet twice. Gott in Himmel, vat a hell in der pines!"

"Hamlin," continued Sheridan quietly, "there is little enough we can do to right this wrong. There is no way in which that Confederate court-martial can be reconvened. But I shall have Shultz's deposition taken and scattered broadcast. We will clear your name of stain. What became of that cowardly cur who lied?"

Hamlin pressed one hand against his throbbing temples, struggling against the faintness which threatened mastery.

"He — he paid for it, sir," he managed to say. "He — he died three days ago in Black Kettle's camp."

"You got him!"

"Yes — I — I got him."

"I have forgotten — what was the coward's name?"

"Eugene Le Fevre, but in Kansas they called him Dupont."

"Dupont! Dupont!" Sheridan struck the table with his closed fist. "Good Lord, man! Not the husband of that woman who ran off with Lieutenant Gaskins, from Dodge?"

"I — I never heard —"

The room whirled before him in mist, the faces vanished; he heard an exclamation from Shultz, a sharp command from Sheridan, and then seemed to crumble up on the floor. There was the sharp rustle of a woman's skirt, a quick, light step, the pressure of an arm beneath his head.

"Quick, orderly, he 's fainted," it was the General's voice, sounding afar off. "Get some brandy,

Shultz. Here, Miss McDonald, let me hold the man's head."

She turned slightly, her soft hand pressing back the hair from Hamlin's forehead.

" No," she protested firmly, " he is my soldier."

And the Sergeant, looking past the face of the girl he loved saw tears dimming the stern eyes of his commander.

THE END

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